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Introduction

As the season changes from spring to summer and the weather heats up, it is a great time to tune up family engagement practices. In this issue of *Engaging Virginia's Family Newsletter*, we feature family search and engagement practices. This edition also shares innovative practices from the field, with workers sharing their experiences and promising practices at the local level. This issue also includes the regular columns: "Kinship Matters", "Fatherhood Practice in Action" and "Best Practice in Action".



Em Parente

Family Search and Engagement in Virginia

Foster care guidance explains family search and engagement as the process that involves exploring the extended networks of people who have been involved with the child over the course of the child's life. The process of finding family and lifelong connections should be guided by the desires and needs of the child, consistent with the child's developmental level. The local departments of social services are directed to search both maternal and paternal sides of the family. Historically, it may have been a challenge to know what to do with the names and information after identifying family members. Here are a few suggestions adapted from the *Children's Services Practice Notes from North Carolina's Child Welfare Social Workers* for engaging family members in a more active role (Vol. 14, No. 1 April 2009).

Expand your thinking about how absent parents and extended family can play an important part in a child's life. Can a grandparent provide respite to prevent placement? Can a former neighbor offer a home base for a youth aging out of foster care? Broadening the questions we ask and options we consider helps successful plans take shape.

Be patient. Don't give up if someone initially seems

reluctant. Some families may have a history of negative interactions with child welfare, or they may have a general distrust of government agencies. Offering small but tangible ways to connect with a child can sometimes lead to more involved commitments: show pictures or letters from the child, ask for their input in a Family Partnership Meeting, or review ways they have helped the child or parent in the past.

Persevere. Even if an absent parent or family member hangs up after a few words, send them a note, thanking them for their time and acknowledging the surprise and difficulty they may have experienced in being contacted. Provide your contact information and invite the family member to call back if they might be able to share any information in order to help the child.

Dig deeper. Extended family members in particular can be the most effective way to increase permanency and to stabilize youth stays in care, especially for older youth, minorities, and sibling groups. Looking beyond the known relatives can help uncover a greater network of people who may step forward on behalf of a child. Open

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Family Search and Engagement in Virginia continued
up new options by expanding your strategies for diligent family search. Attend the next Family Finding Roundtable. Contact Sandy Bell at Sandra.bell@dss.virginia.gov for additional information.

Don't give up. Sometimes the custodial parent may be reluctant to identify the absent parent, relatives, or other adults who care about their children. It can help to give parents time, and to gently remind them about the benefits for their children of permanent family connections, and the harm for children who don't have them. Having a staff member who is designated to do family searches can help reduce resistance, as parents may view this person as more neutral than their own caseworker. Parents may become more open as they see that other family members are concerned and willing to participate in services. When all else fails, you may need to partner with the courts and attorneys to obtain court orders requiring that parents identify relatives.

Ask the children. Most children will happily tell you who is important to them and who has helped them in the

past. Throughout the life of a case, ask children about their supports, and be sure to include as much contact information as possible for the case record.

Focus on the child's needs. Continually bring attention back to what is best for the child, and to what is specifically needed to make that happen. This allows professionals to maintain a neutral stance and focus on joint problem-solving.

The Role of Culture. Respect and explore the role of family culture while engaging family members. Give the family the opportunity to educate and inform you about themselves. Talk with the family about their history and background, and their thoughts and feelings about foster care, adoption, and child welfare agencies. Remember that culture refers to much more than race, and that religion, region, extended family, and personal experiences can influence our beliefs about family. As always, it's important to use translators when a family cannot communicate easily in English, and to educate yourself on some of the common cultural groups in your area.

Innovative Family Engagement Practices

Family Search and Social Media

Article contributed by the Arlington County Child Welfare Team

We all search for a connection—the common thread that binds us to another. Many of us don't have to look further than our own homes to see others with whom we share essential bonds. Our family serves as the cord linking cultural, ethnic and community ties. These connections spur healthy development and help us to navigate the world. However, maintaining connections to family and significant others is challenging for approximately 500,000 children in the U.S. foster care system. Far too often, children are disconnected or have fractured relationships with their families.

Arlington County Department of Human Services staff is embracing the vision of Virginia's Child Transformation Model and implementing strategies that focus on building healthier and stronger families and sustained well-being for children and youth. We believe that children fare best when raised in families, preferably their own when it is safe to do so.

Arlington County conducts extensive outreach in an effort to find family for children and has taken advantage of the increasing technology to enhance family-finding efforts. For example, when more traditional pathways to identifying and locating families proved unsuccessful, one foster-care social worker used Facebook as an avenue to locate family for a teen girl. The youth was able to reconnect with her father in Latin America and the paternal side of her family, who were previously unknown to her. After months of cultivating a relationship through visitation and communication, the youth was adopted by her paternal aunt and uncle.

Foster care staff learned valuable lessons from this success story and continued to use social media and new technologies as search engines for families. Another foster care social worker identified relatives for a sibling group of four using Facebook, connecting the children with their birth father, who had been trying to find them for several months. The worker arranged visits, exchanged photographs and recorded the father's voice reading a children's story so he could be present for his children, even in his absence. After two short months, the father reunified with his children and returned with them

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Innovative Family Engagement Practices continued

to their home country of Nigeria.

These interventions are concrete examples of child-welfare work embodying the values of Arlington County's practice model. All of these children now enjoy the priceless family connections that tie them to their culture, community and a support network that will guide them for the rest of their lives.

At right: Arlington County Child Welfare Team



Accurint Search Yields Positive Outcome

Article contributed from Essex County Department of Social Services

In June 2012, Essex County Department of Social Services (EDSS) received custody of an 11 year old boy. For four and a half months the child's mother denied knowing who the father was. In October 2012, EDSS completed an Accurint search using the mother's name. EDSS sent out twelve letters to people associated with the mother. In about a two week timeframe, EDSS received their first call resulting from the letters sent.

The caller was the child's maternal uncle and he knew the child's father. EDSS then received a phone call from the identified father who was willing to complete a paternity test. In November 2012, the paternity test results confirmed that he was the biological father. The father then took the train from Arkansas to meet his son for the first time.

"I have known about my son but did not have luck looking for him." "I was tickled to death and it felt good that there was someone looking for me for my son."

---Biological father

Accurint for Government PLUS Tool



Article contributed by Rick Grape with LexisNexis

Accurint for Government PLUS is an advanced version of the Accurint system that incorporates a number of

enhancements unavailable through the web platform. This is an enhancement that is being piloted in Virginia and may be available in the near future to local departments of social services. The program requires a software install on the user's machine and gives them the opportunity to manipulate search results in an excel spreadsheet format. Relavint linking graphs have significantly increased functionality, allowing users to incorporate their own case data into the graph, save the graph for further updates and manipulation, link in existing photographs from within our system, permit users to upload and save photographs to their sheets, as well as many other features. The Relavint sheet also

incorporates a timeline chart that does a side-by-side comparison of individuals and addresses to identify past and present links over time. Government PLUS further enables users to access several types of basic and satellite imaging maps to drop in geographic information pertaining to their cases.

This is a great resource for establishing regions where parents have lived. Beyond these enhancements users can remain confident that they will receive the same reports and information found within the current online portal and that their current Accurint IDs will give them access to both www.accurint.com and Accurint for Government PLUS. If you are interested in learning more about Accurint for Government PLUS, contact Rick Grape at richard.grape@lexisnexis.com. For additional information regarding how to obtain access, please contact your Resource Family Consultant.

Fatherhood Practice in Action

A Fatherhood Support Group Success Story

Article contributed by Phil White, MSW and Fatherhood Support Leader from Henrico County Department of Social Services

Henrico County Fatherhood Support Group gets referrals from various sources. Recently, the Henrico Juvenile & Domestic Relation Court made a referral for D.W. D.W. joined the Henrico County Fatherhood Support in connection to his visitation petition regarding his three year old son.

Due to a separation of several years from his wife, the matter was before the court and a GAL had been assigned to ensure the best outcome for the child. There had been several court hearings before I was asked to attend one in March, 2013. As a practice, when I am asked either by the court, the father or an attorney to attend a court hearing due to the father's connections to the support group, the first thing I do is seek out the other parent- the mother. This is done for several reasons: 1) to introduce myself, 2) to answer any questions she may have related to my work with the fatherhood group, and 3) to gain her insight into the interpersonal relationship she has had with the father to date.

The men in the group know and I tell the mother, I don't care which parent the child lives with. My goal for the child is that he or she has a safe, functional relationship with the father and for the father to use his "training" to promote a respectful co-parenting relationship with the mother of his child. The only person that I am in court to support is the child. I tell men all the time that you take a risk when you ask me to attend a court matter with you.

When I attended the first hearing for the D.W. case, a lot of attention was placed on things that happened in the father's past over 20 years ago. He was asked to undergo mental health and substance abuse evaluations. I call these steps by the court, "jumping through the hoops" to obtain your goal of connecting with your child.

At the court hearing I attended, it was clear that the mother was not very happy that any contact with the father might be allowed. The mother wanted assurances that the child would be safe and comfortable with having contact with his dad. The child had not seen his dad since he was one. The request by the mother was a tall order even for the court to ensure the father-child contact would be one of ease. In my dual role of fatherhood support group manager and family treatment specialist, I could be a good fit to supervise the initial face to face contact for the father and son. I recommended

this to the court and it was accepted by both parents.

The initial visit for the father-son took place about three weeks later. The child was left with me alone while we waited for the father to arrive. I knew the father was very nervous about this meeting from previous conversations we had both by phone and in person. The mother was in another location. She could hear her son and me as we talked and played in an open space. As the father approached the building where we were, his steps became slower and slower as he noticed that the child who was holding my hand was his little boy. Once inside the door of the building, he bent down to eye level of his son and asked... "Do you know me"? The son, in his three-year-old voice said, "Daddy". The father just looked at him and tears rolled down his face as he hugged his little guy. This was one of those "wow moments" that I have been part of over the 10 years of facilitating the fatherhood groups. The father and son played. Laughter and lots of pictures were taken on the father's cell phone. The pictures would be shared with his family whom also had been cut off from contact with the child.

Parents need to understand that our children don't belong to us. They are their own person, on their own journey in life. They come from us but are going forward not backward into the parents' lives. Children belong to the entire family to learn from and grow. The visits for this father and son will continue for some time. The goal of this father is to have the standard schedule of every other weekend visitation with his son at his own home with other family members.

Foundation for Working with Men

Engaging men starts with helping men to understand the journey of boyhood-manhood-fatherhood. Each of these stages is connected and make up who men are today. Here are a few key steps to working with fathers:

1. Be an effective facilitator who is willing to share "use yourself" as the foundation of your interaction with the men in the group.
2. Trust is necessary to form an attachment and the attachment will help to open direct insight into the inner self. For men, this can occur in a supportive group environment.
3. Help men to understand the reality that most men are not violent yet most violence is committed by men.

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Fatherhood Practice in Action continued

With this knowledge, 1) men can begin to unlock the inner world of being a man, 2) seek to find ways to step out of the man box, 3) know that men don't have to wear the man-suit 24/7, 4) allow for the reduction of inner stress that most men live with, 5) gain insight to use forgiveness, and 6) use effective communication to improve most interpersonal relationships.

The term 'Man-Up' has nothing to do with personal resiliency, which is internal. Man-Up is more about action than personal reflection as to how men feel about themselves. Men must find ways to seek reconciliation with their own fathers before they can become a healthy father. Most men don't like to fail at anything including relationships. When relationship failures happen, men need not to isolate their feelings but seek support from other men who are "trained" to help with healing, rather than promote destructive hyper masculine behaviorism. All men know some men who need reconstruction with their thinking and behaviors related to power and

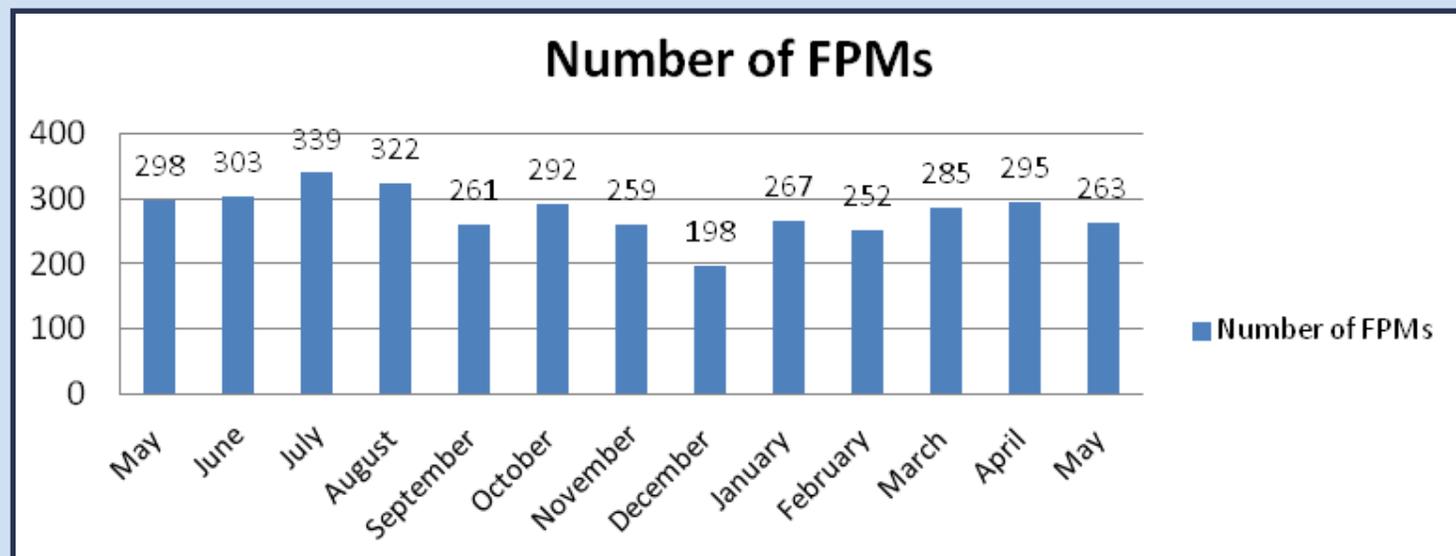
control. The group format builds on the term "Iron Sharpens Iron." "Staying Storm Strong" is the focus objective to help men develop their personhood and less attention to their manhood.

Phil White



2013-2014 Yearly Data

From May 2013 to May 2014, 3,634 Family Partnership Meetings (FPMs) were held across the Commonwealth. During this period, the fewest FPMs occurred in December 2013 (198.) The most FPMs were held in the month of July, 2013 (339).



Safe Measures Report Update

A new report is available regarding FPMs in Safe Measures. A new feature adds a menu that makes it easier to access FPM information. Please contact your Safe Measures administrators to get access to the new reports.

Family Engagement Updates

Family Engagement is critical for improving outcomes with the families that become involved with the child welfare system. In an effort to support local departments of social services the Family Engagement Unit is revising guidance and updating the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on SPARK. A stakeholder group has been formed to assist with the revisions for guidance. If you would like to participate in the stakeholder group please contact Em Parente at em.parente@dss.virginia.gov for additional information. The updated FAQs can be viewed at the following link: http://spark.dss.virginia.gov/divisions/dfs/family_engagement/files/faq/fe_faq.pdf.

Kinship Matters

Maintaining Connections with Incarcerated Parents

In the United States over 1.7 million children under the age of 18 have a parent in the prison system. Of those children, 744,200 have a father incarcerated and 65,500 have a mother incarcerated (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007). Losing a parent to the prison system can be traumatic for children. In most cases the parent has been a consistent figure in the child's life by taking care of them, both emotionally and behaviorally, and providing financial support (National Conference of State Legislators, 2009).

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, a majority of incarcerated fathers report that their children live with the child's biological mother, while a majority of incarcerated mothers report that their children live with a grandparent or another family member. Around 21% of parents identified that their child was living within a kinship home (i.e. a grandparent, aunt, uncle, etc.). This type of living arrangement is a safe and stable home where the child can grow and prosper while their parent(s) are away. For a child, living with a family member can lessen the impact of traumatic events.

However, it is important for children who aren't living with their parents to maintain connections. If the child's parent happens to be incarcerated, special attention needs to be paid to whether it will cause more harm than good for the child to have contact with the parent during that time period. Adults who are taking care of a child whose

parents are incarcerated can support the child by bringing them to visit the parent, allowing the child to mail letters to the parent, or having the child call the incarcerated parent. The Children of Prisoners Library has developed a fact sheet that caretakers can use when the child is getting ready to visit the incarcerated parent: (<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL105-Visiting-Mom.html>). Sesame Street has addressed the issue of incarcerated parents by adding a character named Alex whose father is in prison. Sesame Street has also developed a guide to support parents and caregivers called "[Little children, Big challenges: Incarceration.](#)" The guide is targeted for children ages 3 to 8 and can be obtained at: http://www.sesamestreet.org/cms_services/services?action=download&uid=784d4f44-425b-445a-842b-86b5088cbcc5 by clicking on the title.

Throughout Virginia there are programs that can help families support children with incarcerated parents. These programs can also provide support to address any barriers that might arise when it comes to maintaining contact with the incarcerated parent. Some barriers include: distance between the jail or prison and where the child is living, the parent who is in prison is ashamed and will not allow the child to see them, or prison policies don't allow the child to see the parent. (Please see: Assisting Families of Inmates at <http://www.afoi.org/services/children.html>).

The work that you do to support families dealing with this unique challenge will have a huge impact on the child and their extended family. Below you will find additional resources which we encourage you to share.

-National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated
<http://www.fcnetwork.org/Resource%20Center/resource-center-main.htm>

- National Conference of State Legislators: Children of Incarcerated Parents
<http://www.ncsl.org/documents/cyf/childrenofincarceratedparents.pdf>

-National Health Marriage Resource Center: Incarceration and Family Relationship: A fact sheet
<http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/resource-detail/index.aspx?rid=3285>

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Kinship Matters continued

-Commonwealth of Virginia Commission on Youth

<http://vcoy.virginia.gov/index.asp>

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/Children%20of%20Incarcerated%20Parents.Commission%20on%20Youth_VA.pdf

-Bureau of Justice Statistics: Parents in Prison and their Minor Children

<http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>

-American Bar Association: A Voice for the Young Child with an Incarcerated Parent

<http://apps.americanbar.org/litigation/committees/childrights/content/articles/winter2012-young-child-incarcerated-parent.html>

-Zero to three: Parenting from a Distance

<http://www.zerotothree.org/about-us/areas-of-expertise/zero-to-three-journal/35-2.pdf>

-Office of Child Development through the University of Pittsburg: Children Of Parents In Jail Or Prison: Issues Related To Maintaining Contact

<http://ocd.pitt.edu/Default.aspx?webPageID=244>

-Grandparent.com: When Your Grandchild's Parent Is in Prison

<http://www.grandparents.com/archive/when-grandchild-parent-is-in-prison-jail>

-Annie E. Casey Foundation- Kinship care when parents are incarcerated: What we know, what we can do

http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Child%20Welfare%20Permanence/Foster%20Care/KinshipCareWhenParentsAreIncarceratedWhatWeKn/10147801_Kinship_Paper06a%203.pdf

-The Girl Scouts of America: Girl Scouts Beyond Bars

http://www.girlscouts.org/who_we_are/our_partners/initiatives/pdf/gb_beyond_bars_providing_a_better_path.pdf

Sesame Street Little Children Big Challenges: Incarceration

http://www.sesamestreet.org/cms_services/services?action=download&uid=784d4f44-425b-445a-842b-86b5088cbcc5

Best Practice in Action: The Benefits of Family Engagement

**Reproduced from the Child Welfare Information Gateway.*

More and more evidence suggests that family engagement has many benefits, including:

- **Enhancing the helping relationship.** A family's belief that all its members are respected and that their feelings and concerns are heard strengthens their relationship with their caseworker. This positive relationship, in turn, can increase the chances for successful intervention.
- **Promoting family "buy-in."** When families are part of the decision-making process and have a say in

developing plans that affect them and their children, they are more likely to be invested in the plans and more likely to commit to achieving objectives and complying with treatment that meets their individual needs. A qualitative analysis of findings from the three top-performing metro sites in the 2007-2008 Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) found that child and family involvement in case planning was correlated with (1) active engagement of noncustodial and incarcerated parents, (2) family-centered and strength-based approaches (e.g., team meetings, mediation) effective in building

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working relationships, and (3) strong rapport developed between workers and parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2009).

- **Expanding options.** Inclusion of family members—including fathers and extended family—early in a case provides a greater opportunity to explore the use of relatives as a placement/permanency option for children.
- **Improving the quality and focus of visits.** The partnership developed between the family and social service worker through family engagement strategies strengthens the assessment process and leads to more appropriate service provision.
- **Increasing placement stability.** The Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR) found that States with high ratings for developing case plans jointly with parents and youth also had high percentages of children with permanency and stability in their living situations (HHS, 2004). Research on family group decision-making (FGDM) also points to improvements in creating stability and maintaining family continuity (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003).
- **Improving timeliness of permanency decisions.** Research also suggests that parental involvement is linked to quicker reunification and other forms of permanency (Tam & Ho, 1996; Merkel- Holguin, et al., 2003).
- **Building family decision-making skills.** By being involved in strength-based decision-making processes and having appropriate problem-solving approaches modeled, families are more comfortable communicating their own problem-solving strategies and exploring new strategies that may benefit themselves and their children.
- **Enhancing the fit between family needs and services.** Working collaboratively, caseworkers and families are better able to identify a family's unique needs and develop relevant and culturally appropriate service plans that address underlying needs, build on family strengths, and draw from community supports. A better fit in services often leads to a more effective use of limited resources (Doolan, 2005).

Specific Strategies That Reflect Family Engagement

Family engagement strategies build on the foundation of agency commitment and caseworker skills. State agencies have adopted various strategies for engaging families at case, peer, and system levels, frequently adapting



existing models to meet their own needs. Family engagement strategies include but are not limited to:

- **Frequent and substantive caseworker visits.** Workers must have frequent and meaningful contact with families in order to engage them in the work that needs to be done to protect children, promote permanency, and ensure child well-being. States where caseworkers have regular and well-focused visits with the child and parent have demonstrated improved permanency and well-being outcomes in the CFSRs. Frequent visits with parents also are positively associated with better client-worker relationships; better outcomes in discipline and emotional care of children; timely establishment of permanency goals; timely filing for termination of parental rights; and reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives (Lee & Ayón, 2004; HHS, 2004).
- **Motivational interviewing** (<http://motivationalinterview.org>) is a directive counseling method for enhancing intrinsic motivation and promoting behavior change by helping families explore and resolve ambivalence. This technique, which relies heavily on listening reflectively and asking directive questions, has shown positive results in working with child welfare populations with substance abuse issues (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare).
- VDSS offers CWS 5305 training for Child Welfare workers and supervisors across all program areas. This course will assist workers to engage families in a mutually beneficial partnership and assess a family's readiness for change. Topics for the training include: 1. Engagement and the Strengths Perspective. 2. The Stages of Change. 3. Motivational Interviewing Techniques. 4. Solution-Focused Interviewing Techniques. **Collaborative strategies** emphasize working in partnership with families in a strength-

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based way to support achievement of case goals and objectives. Examples include Collaborative Helping (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0AZV/is_200903/ai_n32319390/) (Madsen, 2009), the Signs of Safety approach (www.signsofsafety.net/signsofsafety) (Turnell & Edwards, 1999), and solution-focused practice (Berg & De Jong, 2004; Antle, Barbee, Christensen, & Martin, 2008).

VDSS Family Engagement Unit recommends forming FPM Roundtables in each region to encourage building family engagement practices and support. For additional information, contact Em Parente at em.parente@dss.virginia.gov.

- **An active and meaningful role for families** can be achieved by involving them in case planning and checking in with them during visits about their understanding of and progress toward the plan. Involvement of the family in case planning is correlated with greater engagement of noncustodial and incarcerated parents, family-centered/strength-based approaches, and stronger rapport between workers and families (HHS, 2009).
- **Father involvement** (<http://www.aban.org/child/fathers/>) recognizes the importance of fathers to the healthy development of children. Agencies are increasingly reaching out to fathers and working to enhance their positive involvement with their children. Fatherhood programs vary greatly. Some are outreach efforts to include fathers in assessment and case planning processes; others help fathers address stressors or behaviors that affect their ability

to support their children.

- **Family search and engagement** (www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/family-search.html) encourages broad-based participation in family decision-making to leverage kinship connections and increase placement/ permanency options. (See article in this issue entitled: Family Search and Engagement in Virginia.
- **Parent Partner Programs** engage parents who were once involved with the child welfare system to serve as mentors to currently involved parents, providing support, advocacy, and help navigating the system. Parent Partner Programs also use the birth parent experience to influence changes in policy and protocol, encourage shared decision-making, strengthen individualized plans, and educate the community.
- **Foster family-birth family meetings** encourage birth families and foster families to share information, help model parenting skills, and support participation of foster families in placement conferences that contribute to reunification efforts.
- **Parent and youth involvement in agency councils and boards** is a proactive way for State and county agencies to gather and use parent and youth input in program and policy development, service design, and program evaluation.

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Seeking Engaging Families Newsletter contributions

The Family Engagement Unit continues to seek success stories to share! Child welfare workers provide great services and support to families in Virginia. We would love to share your story of how a successful Accurant search, Family Partnership Meeting, work with fathers and/or paternal relatives, or kinship care placement worked to change the life of a child or family. Your story could help someone else get inspired to try again or to try something new. If you have a story to share, please contact Em Parente at em.parente@dss.virginia.gov for additional information.