

NEW MEXICO FAMILY ADVOCACY PROGRAM

Child and Family Services Reviews Report



NEW MEXICO
FAMILY ADVOCACY
PROGRAM

September 8, 2022

Table of Contents

Introduction and Acknowledgments	2
Review Methodology Summary	2
Case Review	2
Table 1: NMFAP Targeted Performance Items	2
Supplemental Participant Parent Interview	3
Stakeholder Group Interviews	3
Results	3
Case Review	3
Table 2: Demographic Information of the Target Children Reviewed	3
Table 3: NMFAP Rating Summary	4
Table 4: CYFD Reviews Rating Summary	5
Table 5: NMFAP and CYFD Reviews Rating Comparison	6
Table 6: Overall NMFAP and NMFAP Client Only Rating Comparison	6
Item 4: Stability of Foster Care Placement	7
Item 5: Permanency Goal for Child	7
Item 6: Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption, or Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement	7
Item 7: Placement with Siblings	7
Item 8: Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care	7
Item 10: Relative Placement	8
Item 12B: Needs Assessment and Services to Parents	8
Item 13: Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning	8
Item 15: Caseworker Visits with Parents	8
Supplemental Parent Interview	9
Table 7: Typical Frequency of Meetings Between the Parent and the NMFAP	9
Table 8: Activities Supported by the NMFAP Team	9
Stakeholder Focus Groups	11
Introduction	11
Strengths	11
Challenges or Concerns	12
Training and NMFAP Orientation	13
Case Review System	13
Conclusion	14

Introduction and Acknowledgments

The New Mexico Family Advocacy Program (NMFAP) is administered by the New Mexico Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). The objective of the NMFAP is to improve parent engagement with the child welfare system and outcomes related to child permanency and child well-being through implementation of an interdisciplinary model of legal representation. This program is funded through a federal grant awarded by the Children’s Bureau. A comprehensive review of the program was conducted for the purpose of grant evaluation and continuous quality improvement. The purpose of this report is to present the results of this review. The review team acknowledges the support of the NMFAP administrators, Corrie Griffith, Twila Hoon, and Jennifer Viera.

This review was conducted with the collaboration and support of the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD). In facilitation of the review, the AOC and CYFD entered into an agreement permitting the review team access to the case files maintained in the state’s case management system, access to the state’s designated Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) Online Monitoring System (OMS) portal, child welfare outcome data sharing, and participation in stakeholder interview groups. In particular, the review team acknowledges the support and assistance of CYFD Liaison to the NMFAP, Deputy Director Natividad Posada and CYFD Quality Assurance Manager Angela Baca.

Review Methodology Summary

The complete New Mexico Family Advocacy Program Child and Family Services Reviews Plan (Revised March 3, 2022) is available upon request. Following is a summary of the review methodology. The NMFAP Review included three components:

Case Review

A simple random sample of 30 cases was selected from all families served by the NMFAP from February 2020 to the date of the review, across the program site counties (Bernalillo, Sandoval, Valencia, Cibola, and San Juan Counties). In cases with more than one child in care, a target child was randomly selected for the review. The case review was conducted using the CFSR Round 3 Onsite Review Instrument (OSRI). Information for the review was gathered through a review of CYFD record, court documents, and case participant interviews. Specific items related to outcomes expected to be positively impacted by the NMFAP were rated. The period under review was 12 months. Ten of the case reviewed, or 33.33%, included assignment of a parent mentor.

Table 1: NMFAP Targeted Performance Items

Table 1: NMFAP Targeted Performance Items	
Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations	
Item 4	Stability of Foster Care Placement
Item 5	Permanency Goal for Child
Item 6	Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption, or Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement
Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children	
Item 7	Placement with Siblings
Item 8	Visitation with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care
Item 10	Relative Placement
Well-Being Outcome 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs	
Item 12B	Needs Assessment and Services to Parents
Item 13	Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning
Item 15	Caseworker visits with Parents

Supplemental Participant Parent Interview

Parents were interviewed to inform the case review. In addition, the reviewer asked parents supplemental interview questions developed to solicit specific feedback related to their experience with the NMFAP, the strengths and challenges of the program, and recommendations for continued improvement.

Stakeholder Group Interviews

Key stakeholder groups were interviewed to collect qualitative information about the NMFAP and the program's impact on child welfare outcomes and the case review systemic factor. The stakeholder groups included NMFAP respondent attorneys, NMFAP social workers, NMFAP parent advocates, NMFAP administrators, guardians ad litem and youth attorneys representing children, judges, and CYFD personnel (caseworkers, supervisors, and children's court attorneys).

Results

Case Review

The Child and Family Services Reviews were developed to help states identify strengths and areas needing improvement within the child welfare agency and programs. The purpose of the CFSR is to ensure conformity with federal child welfare requirements, determine what is actually happening to children and families engaged in child welfare services, and enhance capacity to help children and families achieve positive outcomes related to safety, permanency, and well-being.

Table 2: Demographic Information of the Target Children Reviewed

Table 2: Demographic Information of Target Children (n=30)				
Race	Ethnicity	Gender	Age at End of PUR	Reason for agency Involvement*
American Indian/Alaskan Native: 16.66% (5)	Hispanic: 53.33% (16)	Male: 60.00% (18)	5 years or younger: 60.00% (18)	Neglect (not including medical): 93.33% (28)
White: 70.00% (21)	Non-Hispanic: 33.33% (10)	Female: 40.00% (12)	6-12 years: 26.66% (8)	Substance abuse by parent(s): 63.33% (19)
Black/African American: 10.00% (3)	Unknown: 13.33% (4)		13 or older: 13.33% (4)	Physical abuse: 33.33% (10)
Unknown: 3.33% (1)				Mental/Physical health of parent(s): 26.66% (8)
				Domestic violence: 20.00% (6)
				Emotional maltreatment: 16.66% (5)
				Sexual abuse: 6.66% (2)
				Medical neglect: 3.33% (1)
				Substance abuse by child: 3.33% (1)
				Child behavior: 3.33% (1)
				Mental/Physical health of child: 3.33% (1)
				Other: 3.33% (1)

*More than one reason for agency involvement can be designated and thus the total does not equal 30.

It is hypothesized that families receiving advocacy through the New Mexico Family Advocacy Program will have improved outcomes related to the targeted performance Items. Note that the review is based upon the state agency efforts in these areas. It is believed that there will be improved outcomes due to the enhanced advocacy and support by NMFAP. The results of the NMFAP case review are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: NMFAP Rating Summary

Table 3: NMFAP Rating Summary			
Cases=30			
Performance Item Ratings			
Performance Item	Strength	Area Needing Improvement	Not Applicable
Item 4: Stability of Foster Care Placement	60% (n=18)	40% (n=12)	n=0
Item 5: Permanency Goal for the Child	70% (n=21)	30% (n=9)	n=0
Item 6: Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption, or Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement	60% (n=18)	40% (n=12)	n=0
Item 7: Placement with Siblings	81.25% (n=13)	18.75% (n=3)	n=14
Item 8: Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care	63.33% (n=19)	36.67% (n=11)	n=0
Item 10: Relative Placement	66.67% (n=20)	33.33% (n=10)	n=0
Item 12B: Needs and Services to Parents	46.67% (n=14)	53.33% (n=16)	n=0
Item 13: Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning	56.67% (n=17)	43.33% (n=13)	n=0
Item 15: Caseworker visits with parents	36.67% (n=11)	63.33% (n=19)	n=0

The data presented in Table 4 are the ratings for the targeted items based upon the ongoing periodic reviews conducted by the CYFD quality assurance team. The data represents reviews that were conducted in the NMFAP sites. The data represents all foster care cases reviewed in Bernalillo, Sandoval, Valencia, Cibola, and San Juan Counties with case reviews conducted in 2021 and 2022. A total of 56 foster care cases were reviewed. **Note that this data is presented for context and informational purposes. It cannot be concluded that differences in performance ratings are the result of NMFAP involvement.**

Table 5 illustrates a side by side comparison of the NMFAP case review and the ongoing quality assurance reviews, including the difference in the ratings. Inter-rater reliability between the two programs was assured because the two case reviewers and the person conducting quality assurance for NMFAP have extensive experience in the CYFD quality assurance program. The results highlighted in green represent ratings that were higher in the NMFAP review and results highlighted in orange represent results that were lower in the NMFAP review. When comparing the data, it is noted that the cases reviewed during the ongoing CYFD reviews include children in care for a longer period of time and children who are freed for adoption, while the NMFAP sample are newer cases.

Table 4: CYFD Reviews Rating Summary

Table 4: CYFD Reviews Rating Summary			
	Cases=56		
	Performance Item Ratings		
Performance Item	Strength	Area Needing Improvement	Not Applicable
Item 4: Stability of Foster Care Placement	82.14% (n=46)	17.86% (n=10)	n=0
Item 5: Permanency Goal for the Child	67.31% (n=35)	32.69% (n=17)	n=4
Item 6: Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption, or Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement	30.36% (n=17)	69.64% (n=39)	n=0
Item 7: Placement with Siblings	86.49% (n=32)	13.51% (n=5)	n=19
Item 8: Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care	68.75% (n=22)	31.25% (n=10)	n=24
Item 10: Relative Placement	73.21% (n=41)	26.79% (n=15)	n=0
Item 12B: Needs and Services to Parents	58.97% (n=23)	41.03% (n=16)	n=17
Item 13: Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning	78.43% (n=40)	21.57% (n=11)	n=5
Item 15: Caseworker visits with parents	48.72% (n=19)	51.28% (n=20)	n=17

Table 5: NMFAP and CYFD Reviews Rating Comparison

Table 5: NMFAP and CYFD Reviews Rating Comparison			
Performance Item	Performance Item Ratings		
	NMFAP Strength Rating	CYFD Strength Rating	Difference
Item 4: Stability of Foster Care Placement	60%	82.14%	-22.14%
Item 5: Permanency Goal for the Child	70%	67.31%	2.87%
Item 6: Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption, or Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement	60%	30.36%	29.64%
Item 7: Placement with Siblings	81.25%	86.49%	-5.24%
Item 8: Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care	63.33%	68.75%	-5.42%
Item 10: Relative Placement	66.67%	73.21%	-6.54%
Item 12B: Needs and Services to Parents	46.67%	58.97%	-12.3%
Item 13: Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning	56.67%	78.43%	-21.76%
Item 15: Caseworker visits with parents	36.67%	48.72%	-12.05%

The data presented in Table 6 are the strength ratings for specific Items in which parents are rated. The table includes the strength ratings for the item overall in comparison to the performance in the item for only the NMFAP client. NMFAP clients experienced better outcomes in these items than the parent not assigned to NMFAP. ***This outcome supports the hypothesis that parents receiving advocacy and support through the NMFAP engage more effectively with the child welfare system.***

Table 6: Overall NMFAP and NMFAP Client Only Rating Comparison

Table 6: NMFAP Client Only and Overall NMFAP Rating Comparison			
Performance Item	Performance Item Ratings		
	NMFAP Client Only Strength Rating	Overall NMFAP Strength Rating	Difference
Item 8: Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care	75.86%	63.33%	12.53%
Item 12B: Needs and Services to Parents	56.66%	46.67%	9.99%
Item 13: Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning	73.33%	56.67%	16.66%
Item 15: Caseworker visits with parents	50.00%	36.67%	13.33%

Item 4: Stability of Foster Care Placement

This item evaluates whether the target child is in a stable placement and if any changes in placement were in the best interest of the child and consistent with achieving the child's permanency goal. In 60% of the cases reviewed, this item was rated as a strength. Strength ratings reflected efforts to place children in relative homes or moves to relative homes that supported permanency; strength ratings also reflected placements or moves to non-relative homes, as long as the moves supported case goals. These placements were stable, and the resource parents were able to meet the needs of the children. Cases that were rated as an area needing improvement included children who experienced multiple moves during the review period, circumstances in which there were insufficient placement resources to meet the behavioral health needs of the child, and one case in which there were concerns related to maltreatment in the placement.

Item 5: Permanency Goal for Child

This item evaluates whether the agency established appropriate permanency goals for the child in a timely manner. In 27 of the 30 cases reviewed had a goal of reunification. The number of reunification cases reflects that the sample for this review was comprised of relatively new cases served by NMFAP since February 2020. 70% of the cases reviewed rated a strength for this performance item. Strength ratings reflected that the agency established the permanency goals that were in effect during the period under review in a timely manner and those goals were appropriate given the case circumstances. Overall, in the cases rated as an area needing improvement, it was determined that either the reunification plan was no longer appropriate, or a change in plan was not made timely given the circumstances of the case. In 3 of the cases reviewed, the agency attempted to change the plan due to lack of progress and engagement by the parent, but the court did not approve that change.

Item 6: Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption, or Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement

This item evaluates whether the agency made concerted efforts to achieve the permanency goal in a timely manner based upon the timeframes established by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). The following time frames for achievement were considered for each goal:

- Reunification: 12 months
- Guardianship: 18 months
- Adoption: 24 months

In 60% of the cases reviewed this item rated as a strength.

Item 7: Placement with Siblings

This item evaluates whether the agency made concerted efforts to ensure that siblings in foster care are placed together unless separation was necessary to meet the needs of one of the siblings. In 16 of the 30 cases reviewed were applicable for assessment of this item. Of the applicable cases reviewed, 13 cases or 81.25% were rated as a strength.

Item 8: Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care

This item evaluates whether the agency made concerted efforts to ensure that visitation between a child in foster care and his or her mother, father, and siblings placed separately was of sufficient frequency and quality to promote the continuity in the child's relationships with these close family members. For this item to rate a strength, each applicable participant (mother, father, sibling) must be determined to have sufficient frequency and quality of visits during the period under review.

In 63.33% of the cases reviewed, this item was rated as a strength. Since the NMFAP team is randomly assigned to work with a respondent, further analysis was conducted to determine if the parent receiving advocacy through NMFAP experienced better outcomes in this performance item. Of the 30 cases reviewed, NMFAP was assigned to work with the mother in 24 cases, a paternal grandmother in one case, and the father in 5 cases. Per the

instrument instructions, one of the respondents assigned to NMFAP was determined to be not applicable for assessment of this item. Of the 29 applicable parents participating in NMFAP, in 22 cases or 75% it was determined that the frequency and quality of visitation was sufficient.

Item 10: Relative Placement

This item evaluates whether the agency made concerted efforts to place the child with relatives when appropriate. This item was rated as strength 66.67% or in 20 of the 30 cases. In 15 of the cases rated as a strength, the target child was placed with a relative. In the cases that were rated as an area needing improvement there were insufficient efforts to identify, locate, and assess either maternal or paternal relatives. In two cases in which the child was placed with a relative, the item was rated area needing improvement because the placement was determined not to be stable and at risk for disruption.

Item 12B: Needs Assessment and Services to Parents

This item evaluates whether the agency made concerted efforts to assess the needs and provide services to parents that were necessary to achieve case goals and adequately address the issues relevant to the agency's involvement with the family. In 46.67% of the cases reviewed, this item rated a strength. Looking at only the client served by NMFAP, 56.66% rated a strength for this performance item.

Item 13: Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning

This item evaluates whether the agency made concerted efforts to involve parents and children (if developmentally appropriate) in the case planning process on an ongoing basis. For the purpose of the review, actively involved in case planning is defined as engaging the mother and father in identifying their strengths and needs, identifying services and providers, establishing goals, evaluating progress toward goals, and discussing the case plan. Of the 30 cases reviewed, 56.67% or 17 cases rated as a strength. Evaluating only the parent served by the NMFAP, 73.33% or 22 of the cases rated as a strength for this performance item.

Item 15: Caseworker Visits with Parents

This item evaluates whether the frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and the mothers and fathers of the child was sufficient to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being of the child and promote achievement of case goals. Visits are defined as face to face contact. In determining the quality of the visits, the reviewer considers the duration of the visits, the issues addressed during the visits, and the location of the visits. Of the 30 cases reviewed, 36.67% or 11 cases were rated as a strength. Looking at only the parent served by NMFAP, 50% or 15 of the cases were rated as a strength. In the cases rated as an area needing improvement although the quality of the visits was good, it was most often determined that the frequency of the contact was insufficient given the case circumstances.

Supplemental Parent Interview

The supplemental parent interview was administered to each parent participant interviewed for the purpose of the case review. At the onset of the interview the parent was provided a brief overview of the purpose of the review, an overview of the NMFAP, and confidentiality, including how their feedback and information will be used to inform the review. The interviewee was asked standard questions about their lived experience as participants of the NMFAP. The supplemental interview was documented by the reviewer. Data related to the reported frequency and quality of the NMFAP services were collected.

The questions included the frequency of meetings with the NMFAP Attorney, the NMFAP Social Worker, and the NMFAP Parent Mentor, the types of activities that the NMFAP team supports, and qualitative questions related to the program. The Parent Interview Form is included in the review plan document and is available upon request.

Table 7: Typical Frequency of Meetings Between the Parent and the NMFAP

Table 7: Typical Frequency of Meetings Between the Parent and the NMFAP			
	NMFAP Attorney (n=30)	NMFAP Social Worker (n=30)	NMFAP Parent Mentor (n=10)
None	0.00% (0)	0.00% (0)	0.00% (0)
Less than Monthly	33.33% (10)	3.33% (1)	10.00% (1)
Monthly	26.66% (8)	26.66% (8)	40.00% (4)
Twice per Month	36.66% (11)	30.00% (9)	30.00% (3)
Weekly	0% (0)	33.33% (10)	20.00% (2)
More than Weekly	3.33% (1)	6.66% (2)	0.00% (0)

The meetings reported by the parents included face to face contact, phone calls and video conference. The parent participants also described ongoing contact by email and text. **Of the 30 parents interviewed, 25 or 83.33% reported that the frequency of their contact with the NMFAP team was sufficient.**

Table 8: Activities Supported by the NMFAP Team

Table 8: Activities Supported by the NMFAP Team	
	n=30
Helping to communicate with CYFD worker	96.66% (29)
Explaining and helping to understand court proceedings	93.33% (28)
Helping to access services I need	93.33% (28)
Helping to have input into my case plan	90.00% (27)
Attending Meetings with CYFD	86.66% (26)
Ensuring visitation with the child	70.00% (21)
Transporting to assessments and/or services	63.33% (19)
Helping to advocate for relative placement	63.33% (19)
Helping to identify relatives who are potential supports	63.33% (19)
Helping to access visitation with my child	53.33% (16)
Other *	16.66% (5)

*Other responses included emotional support activities.

The parents interviewed reported high satisfaction with the NMFAP. Participants describe what works well with the program including support, advocacy, and communication. A sample of statements from participants include:

- NMFAP reminds me that someone is in my corner.
- NMFAP doesn't judge me. I am learning to trust.
- The NMFAP social worker never gives up on me.
- NMFAP is always a call away.
- NMFAP explains things.
- NMFAP helps me to understand the judge.
- The NMFAP social worker helps me to access services and believes in me.
- The NMFAP social worker engaged with my children during trial home visit.
- NMFAP did not make decisions for me but soothed me when the tears came.

When asked about what could be improved with the NMFAP, the parents recommended broader availability of the program, more face to face time with the attorneys, and more support in the rural communities. A sample of statements from participants include:

- More NMFAP teams are needed. Both parents would benefit from this support.
- Would like additional support for my children who are not in foster care.
- More contact with NMFAP in the community.
- NMFAP teams are needed in rural communities.
- After care services. I am worried about not having NMFAP in my life going forward.
- More frequent contact with the NMFAP attorney.
- More in person contact with the NMFAP attorney.
- The social worker should have someone to cover for her when she is not available.

Stakeholder Focus Groups

Focus group meetings were convened with key stakeholder groups concurrent to the case review process. The purpose of these meetings was to gather the perspective and feedback of child welfare stakeholders who work with NMFAP or are engaged in cases served by the program. The groups were asked open-ended questions related to their understanding of the NMFAP, their experience with the program, the impact of the program on cases, trainings and orientation related to the program, and the Case Review systemic factor as defined by the CFSR. The Stakeholder Interview Guide is included in the review plan document and is available upon request. Note that the interview of the NMFAP administrators was modified to address specific issues related to implementation of the program. The groups were advised that the information gathered during the stakeholder interviews would be used to inform the program evaluation and for continuous quality improvement.

The groups were held virtually by Zoom between April and July 2022. The duration of the sessions were typically 1.5-2 hours. A standard interview protocol was utilized to facilitate the interview and one or more of the review team participated as note-takers for each session. In order to facilitate the greatest participation, multiple sessions were held for some of the groups. The following groups were represented:

- NMFAP Social Workers and Parent Advocates (1 Session)
- NMFAP Respondent Attorneys (2 Sessions)
- NMFAP Administrators (1 Session)
- Guardians ad Litem and Youth Attorneys from the NMFAP site counties (2 Sessions)
- Judges from the NMFAP Site counties (2 Sessions)
- CYFD caseworkers and supervisors from the NMFAP site counties (6 Sessions)

Introduction

Stakeholder focus group meetings were convened with the NMFAP administrators and practitioners on 4/13/22, 4/14/22, 4/21/22, and 6/23/22. Sessions with the judiciary were convened on 4/26/22 and 6/29/22. There were six sessions with CYFD personnel on 5/16/22, 5/17/22, 5/23/22, and 5/25/22. Two sessions were held with guardians ad litem and youth attorneys on 6/24/22 and 7/20/22. Since the grant was implemented, approximately 205 parents have been served. There were 13 NMFAP attorneys on contract, 8 social workers, and 2 parent mentors, with an additional social worker and parent mentor in the process of being on-boarded. Following is a summary of the key points from these meetings.

Strengths

Program strengths identified during the stakeholder meetings included enhanced advocacy and support for parents, improved communication and participation in case planning and the court process, and better engagement in services.

Several participants expressed that the NMFAP is making a difference in how parents are represented. One participant described it as an “increased respect for the parent voice.” The NMFAP team has more contact with the parent than in traditional cases in which a respondent attorney alone is assigned. One participant described NMFAP as “balancing out the power differential” with CYFD. Another NMFAP practitioner described taking time to “chunk out” what is going on and explain the information, so the parent understands. There is more of an opportunity for parents to engage in the process and understand the proceedings. One NMFAP practitioner stated that everything is different in NMFAP cases and described NMFAP as an “unconditional relationship” where parents have a voice. Another said NMFAP “meets clients where they are.” In addition, the parent mentor role was highlighted as a unique and invaluable component of the program. Parent mentors have the “lived experience, and they know when to slow down the process and support parents.”

Several participants reported CYFD is more involved and there is better communication between the parties. The social workers and parent mentors were described both as advocates for the parents and supports that can hold

the parents accountable. The respondent attorneys reported that many of the NMFAP clients are more engaged in the court process. This sentiment was echoed by some of the judges who described increased parent involvement, more visitation, and a more concerted effort to move toward trial home visit in cases in which the NMFAP is assigned. It was noted that parents with an NMFAP social worker are more present and engaged during court hearings. It was further explained that since most of the hearings are virtual, in at least one judicial district the NMFAP social worker is often physically present with the parent and is helping to negotiate the technology.

CYFD permanency workers and supervisors reported that NMFAP helps to link parents to services and advocate for visitation. The NMFAP social worker communicates with the permanency worker at least monthly and when there are court hearings everyone is on the same page. It was reported that parents assigned to NMFAP show up for worker/client visits and are more punctual and engaged in their case planning.

Several participants shared that the NMFAP social worker often has information about community resources and can serve to advocate for services and help parents access those supports. The NMFAP social workers are licensed master level practitioners, and this informs the advocacy with the parent. The social workers provide case level support including transportation to help parents make progress. This was described as a real strength of the program, but there are also limitations since the rural communities do not have adequate services for parents. Along the same lines, the participants shared that even the NMFAP teams serving parents in the rural areas are not based in those communities.

Challenges or Concerns

The identified challenges reflected the different roles of the stakeholders but can be broadly categorized as program implementation and administrative challenges and concerns related to the role and influence of the NMFAP in cases.

Several participants remarked that implementation of the program has required that the team learn to work together to serve families and to communicate more effectively with CYFD and the courts. This has been challenging with worker turnover at CYFD. It was noted that implementation was affected by the challenges stemming from the pandemic. A key aspect of the program is engagement and support to parents. The pandemic resulted in a movement to virtual court hearings and virtual services. Building rapport, gaining trust, and engaging parents has been challenging. Many of the cases filed during the pandemic have been particularly complex, with significant substance abuse and mental health issues at the forefront. At the same time, filing of new cases by CYFD has been down during the pandemic and so assigning new cases to the program has been impacted.

Several participants discussed challenges presented related to the assignment of the NMFAP team. Since NMFAP is not assigned to every case and to only one respondent in a case, sometimes there is a parent who would really benefit from the additional support and advocacy, but they do not receive it. Conversely, some parents that are assigned do not engage and significant time and resources are spent to work with those parents before they are discharged from NMFAP.

Some participants described challenges related to communication, especially if the parent is triangulating with different team members or other partners like CYFD. It has required all the parties to be diligent in their communication. One participant commented that the program “institutionalizes” this triangulation. Several stakeholders discussed employing strategies to address this issue including group emails or texts and regular monthly team meetings to ensure everyone was on the same page.

Some of the participants expressed challenges with collaboration between the NMFAP and CYFD. It was related that especially early in the implementation some CYFD staff did not believe in the premise of the program and felt that it created a barrier in building rapport directly with the client since the NMFAP social worker was always present during visits.

Several participants expressed concern about a disconnect in the role of the NMFAP social worker. It was described that even as the NMFAP social worker is providing support and services to the parent, they operate in secret since they are a member of the legal team and protected by attorney/client privilege. Some participants are concerned that the NMFAP team are not operating from the premise of the best interest of the child and that the program reflects a broader shift from protecting the interests of children to parent rights. One participant expressed that there is a rush to return children home, and another agreed calling the phenomena, “railroading reunification.” Another concern that some participants expressed is that the NMFAP team provides the parent so much support before and during trial home visit that it is difficult to determine the progress the parent is making. Some participants raised the issue that there is not a process for raising up these types of concerns about the program without being labeled as anti-parent or opposed to reunification.

Training and NMFAP Orientation

Overall, the stakeholder groups provided positive feedback about the training and orientation offered by NMFAP. Many of the participants mentioned the monthly virtual trainings offered through ECHO. These trainings were described as topical and easy to access. One participant mentioned that for some of the sessions CLE’s are offered. Other participants agreed and several said that they try to attend as many sessions as possible. It was also noted that the training is open to everyone including CYFD workers.

In addition to the ECHO trainings, the NMFAP Administrative team has provided training at the Children’s Law Institute and monthly in-service trainings for CYFD. One challenge centered around training related to worker turnover at CYFD; several participants noted that with the high turnover many permanency planning staff and even supervisors do not understand the program and the roles of the NMFAP in cases. One recommendation was to provide orientation material in writing so when a new case is assigned, a description of the program and the roles of the NMFAP team are readily available.

Case Review System

Each of the groups were also asked for their feedback about the case review systemic factor as defined in Item 20 of the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR). The interview questions from the CFSR Round 3 Stakeholder Interview Guide were employed to facilitate this discussion.

Although many of the participants reported being able to access some data pertinent to case planning, the information was primarily available at the case level and was fragmented across systems. There is no data exchange across the court and agency systems. For example, although the NMFAP practitioners, GAL and Youth Attorneys, and judges can access information about individual case plans through the court database Odyssey, they cannot easily pull data related to all the plans. One of the judges reported that that there is a data work group and efforts are being made to update Odyssey, but progress is slow.

CYFD personnel can access some data related to case planning through the case management system, FACTS, but again most of the participants described reviewing individual case plans. It was a consensus that the case plans do not specifically note how parents and children are involved in case planning and that the only way to ascertain this is through reading case notes.

Conclusion

The goals of the New Mexico Family Advocacy Program are to improve parent engagement with the child welfare system and outcomes related to child permanency and well-being.

Based upon this review parents receiving advocacy through the program engaged more effectively with the child welfare system. This was especially demonstrated through the information received during the parent interviews. The parents overwhelmingly expressed satisfaction with the program and specifically related feeling supported. Additionally, parents reported that the program helped them to communicate with the CYFD caseworker, understand court proceedings, and access needed services. Parents described frequent contact with the program and reported that the NMFAP team was responsive and available for questions and support. This strength was reinforced by many of the stakeholder groups, who related parents were more engaged in case planning activities and court proceedings. It was noted that this support was especially evident during logistical challenges stemming from the pandemic.

Case review items related to improved engagement include visiting with parents and siblings (Item 8), needs and services to parents (Item 12B), child and family involvement in case planning (Item 13), and caseworker visits with parents (Item 15). The case review did not demonstrate improved outcomes in these performance items when compared to the data from the ongoing CYFD quality assurance reviews, but the parents engaged with the program did rate better in these areas than the parent not assigned to NMFAP. This outcome may support the concern, raised in stakeholder focus groups, that only one parent is represented by the program.

This review demonstrated improved outcomes related to establishment of appropriate permanency goals and achievement of permanency within required timeframes. In comparison to the ongoing CYFD case reviews, the NMFAP performed slightly better in Item 5, evaluating whether the agency established appropriate permanency goals for the child in a timely manner. Compared to the data from the ongoing CYFD quality assurance reviews, the NMFAP performed better in the case review item achieving reunification, guardianship, adoption, or other planned permanent living arrangement (Item 6). Some of stakeholders related that the advocacy provided by the NMFAP supported timely reunification and support during trial home visits helped parents to be successful. Conversely some of the stakeholders expressed concern that reunification was premature in cases served by the NMFAP. Although beyond the scope of this review, it may be beneficial to assess additional outcomes such as repeat maltreatment and re-entry into foster care for children whose parents received services through the NMFAP.

Overall, there is agreement among the stakeholder groups and parents interviewed that the child welfare system is complex and that families engaged in the system are experiencing significant stress and trauma. Parents reported feeling fearful, angry, overwhelmed, and confused after their children were removed and they began working with CYFD, service providers, and the courts. The New Mexico Family Advocacy Program effectively provides support and advocacy for these parents during this time.