

# Site Visit Report: YMCA Families United Family Group Conferencing Program

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/fgdm/>

Award #: 90CF0027

Cluster: Family Connection Grants: Using Family Group Decision-Making to Build Protective Factors for Children and Families

Grantee: YMCA of San Diego County (<http://www.ymca.org/>)

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# Site Visit Report: YMCA Families United Family Group Conferencing Program

## SUMMARY

Using a Children's Bureau Family Connection grant, the Youth and Family Services Division (YFS) of the San Diego YMCA, in partnership with San Diego County Child Welfare Services (CWS), Casey Family Programs, and Harder and Company Community Research, developed and implemented the Families United Family Group Conferencing Program. The project uses a regionalized service delivery model based on the *Guidelines for Family Group Decision Making in Child Welfare*<sup>1</sup> created by the American Humane Association. This demonstration project is measuring whether the use of Family Group Conferencing (FGC), which supports families in finding their own solutions to problems, will improve child welfare outcomes.

The signed San Diego County Memorandum of Agreement requires that all CWS voluntary<sup>2</sup> cases be referred to Families United. Initially, the treatment group and the comparison group both consisted of voluntary cases selected at random; however, the referrals that were received did not meet the projected number of cases. Therefore, 2 years into the project, Families United, with the Children's Bureau's approval, expanded the types of cases accepted in the project to include families receiving services from Kinship Support, a kinship program administered by YMCA Families United, CWS court-dependent cases, and cases of youth in long-term residential placements without a permanent family resource or a permanent connection. The evaluation process and methodology was modified to adjust for the changes in case type and case randomization.

During part of the grant period, the FGC coordinators were co-located in two CWS offices in the county, which allowed them to attend and participate in multidisciplinary team meetings with CWS social workers, discuss cases with the assigned social worker, participate in case planning, and promote the project as a beneficial service to families served by CWS.

Project staff, under the direction of Casey Family Programs, conducted Permanency Roundtables<sup>3</sup> for 10 youth in long-term residential placements who did not have a permanent family resource or a permanent connection. In addition to the Permanency Roundtable, Family Finding<sup>4</sup> was used to locate family members who may be a resource for the each youth. Family members, once located, were invited to participate with the youth in an FGC meeting with the goal of establishing permanency for the youth with a family member.

The project evaluators, in conjunction with the Advisory Team, developed a toolkit that will provide other grantees, as well as entities considering applying for a demonstration grant, with guidance on how to work with community partners on a grant and how to sustain effective collaboration in a research-based project.

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<sup>1</sup> To review the *Guidelines for Family Group Decision Making in Child Welfare*, please visit <http://www.americanhumane.org/assets/pdfs/children/fgdm/guidelines.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Voluntary cases are cases in which a substantiated incident of child maltreatment occurred, but the incident did not meet the standard for court involvement or removal of the child from the home.

<sup>3</sup> A permanency roundtable is a structured, professional case consultation that examines the barriers to establishing permanency for a child in out-of-home placement and results in a plan to expedite permanency for the child.

<sup>4</sup> Family Finding uses various methods and strategies to locate and engage relatives of children currently living in out-of-home care with the goal of connecting children with a family member.

The project evaluation uses both process and outcome evaluations. The process evaluation assesses the implementation of the project, fidelity to the model, integration of FGC into the CWS process, and the achievement of project goals. The outcome evaluation uses the randomized controlled trial design to assess the effectiveness of the FGC compared with the typical CWS processes. The outcomes evaluation examines improvements in child and family well-being and the capacity to resolve the issues that led to CWS involvement.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Families United Family Group Conferencing Program," (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/>).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Abstract

Using a Children's Bureau Family Connection grant, the Youth and Family Services Division (YFS) of the San Diego YMCA developed and implemented the Families United Family Group Conferencing Program. The project uses a regionalized service delivery model based on the *Guidelines for Family Group Decision Making in Child Welfare*<sup>5</sup> created by the American Humane Association. The project provides services, including Family Group Conferencing (FGC) meetings, to families involved with or in the custody of San Diego County Child Welfare Services (CWS) and families receiving services through the YMCA Kinship Support Program. This demonstration project is measuring whether the use of FGC, which supports families in finding their own solutions to problems, will improve child welfare outcomes.

As a demonstration project, Families United includes a treatment group and a comparison group.<sup>6</sup> The treatment group receives services offered through Families United, while the comparison group receives only the services offered by CWS; however, all participants who consent to participate in the study will be kept in the evaluation study for the duration of the project. Each program participant, including those randomized into the comparison group, will receive a structured phone interview at the end of 12 months to answer questions. The responses will be used as part of the evaluation process.

YFS of the San Diego YMCA has provided social services since 1970. Since 1990, YFS has provided services to youth transitioning out of foster care through its Independent Living Skills and Transitional Living programs. Additionally, since 1999, YFS has provided services to kinship families through the Kinship Support Services program.

## VIRTUAL SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred September 16, 2014. During the course of the site visit, group and individual interviews were conducted with project staff and the evaluation team, including the following individuals:

Gwendolyn Shelton, Family Group Coordinator  
Robin Pepper, Family Group Coordinator  
Saul Estavilla, Family Group Coordinator  
Danielle Zuniga, Program Director  
Kim Morgan, Executive Director YMCA Families  
Jennifer James, Lead Evaluator, Harder and Company  
Cristina Magana, Evaluator, Harder and Company  
Melissa Proctor, Casey Family Program

In addition, a telephone interview was conducted on October 3, 2014, with Becki Debont, the San Diego County CWS representative to the Advisory Committee.

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<sup>5</sup> To review the *Guidelines for Family Group Decision Making in Child Welfare*, please visit <http://www.americanhumane.org/assets/pdfs/children/fgdm/guidelines.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Detailed information about participation selection and randomization is included in the Project Highlights section of this report

During the group interviews, the following topics were discussed:

- The reasons for the development of the project
- The successes of the project
- The challenges of the project
- The early results of the project
- The evaluation process
- The sustainability of the project

Additional information to inform this site visit report was obtained from the project's semiannual report and semiannual evaluation report for the reporting period ending March 31, 2014, the Family Connection Grantee Profile completed by Evaluation Technical Assistance Liaison, Connie Vu, James Bell Associates; and documents provided to the site visitor during and immediately following the site visit.

## Project Highlights

Families United serves all six regions of San Diego County CWS: Central, North Central, South Bay, East, North Inland, and North Coastal. According to information provided by Families United, the objectives of the project are to examine whether an FGC intervention leads to better outcomes for families involved in the child welfare system and to assess the effectiveness of integrating FGC into the county CWS process.

San Diego YMCA partnered with San Diego CWS, Casey Family Programs, and Harder and Company Community Research to develop, implement, and monitor/evaluate the project. The partnerships were described as very collaborative, with each partner having a voice and actively participating in the project advisory board that met monthly to guide the project, discuss challenges, and determine resolutions to those challenge. Each partner brought expertise and knowledge to the table, which, by all accounts, contributed to the success of the project.

**Staff training and consultation:** In addition to participating in the planning and advisory role, the family engagement liaison with Casey Family Programs trained the coordinators on FGC and observed FGC meetings to ensure fidelity to the model. Additionally, the liaison provided consultation to the coordinators on involving youth in FGC meetings and managing difficult situations that may arise during an FGC meeting.

**Case criteria:** The project served and evaluated the services provided to CWS voluntary<sup>7</sup> cases in both the treatment group and the comparison group. The signed San Diego County Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) requires that all CWS voluntary cases be referred to Families United. Initially, the treatment group and the comparison group both consisted of voluntary cases selected at random; however, the referrals they received did not meet the projected number of cases. Therefore, 2 years into the project, Families United, with the Children's Bureau's approval, expanded the types of cases included in the project. The project began accepting referrals from Kinship Support, a kinship program administered by YMCA Families United, as well as CWS court-dependent cases. During the last year, the project also began accepting cases of youth in long-term residential care without a permanent family resource or a permanent connection. As a result of the expanded case acceptance criteria, the composition of the treatment group changed to include not only the voluntary cases selected for the treatment group at random, but all of the court-dependent cases, youth in need of permanency cases, and kinship cases, too. The comparison group includes only voluntary cases.<sup>8</sup> The evaluation process and methodology was modified to adjust for the changes in case type and case randomization.

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<sup>7</sup> Voluntary cases are cases in which a substantiated incident of child maltreatment occurred, but the incident did not meet the standard for court involvement or removal of the child from the home.

<sup>8</sup> Neither the CWS court-dependent cases nor the cases of the youth in need of permanency could be included in the comparison group as children in foster care cases cannot be randomized.

All voluntary case participants who consent to participate in the study are kept in the evaluation study for the duration of the project. The voluntary cases in the comparison group do not receive service provision from YMCA Families United, but do receive the services generally offered by San Diego CWS to voluntary cases.

**Referral and FGC process for CWS voluntary cases:** Once a referral is received, the family group coordinator contacts the CWS social worker to schedule a joint home visit with the family. If the social worker is not available, the coordinator will conduct the visit alone, explain the project to the family, and explain that participation in the project is voluntary. If the family consents to participate in the project, a neutral member of the YMCA Family United staff assigns the family to the treatment group or the comparison group. Once this is determined, the coordinator informs the family and the CWS social worker of the family's status with the project. All participants who consent to participate in the study are kept in the evaluation study for the duration of the project. At the end of 12 months,<sup>9</sup> those participants randomized into the comparison group, as well as those in the treatment group, participate in a structured phone interview.

If the family is determined to be part of the intervention group, the coordinator receives the CWS investigation report and any additional CWS history on the family. The coordinator again meets with the family and begins preparations for the FGC meeting. Preparing for the meeting includes the following:

- Explaining and having the family sign a release of information<sup>10</sup>
- Completing a family diagram, including an Ecomap and/or genogram
- Administering the assessment tools to the family
  - North Carolina Family Assessment Scale<sup>11</sup>
  - Friends Protective Factors Survey<sup>12</sup>
- Determining who will be invited to the meeting
- Contacting those invited and explaining the FGC process
- Ensuring that all family members know why CWS was involved with the family
- Helping family members and other participants determine what needs to be addressed in the FGC meeting

In addition to preparing the adults for the FGC meeting, the coordinator also prepares the children/youth. The coordinator meets with the child to determine the level of participation the child would like to have in the meeting, and what, if any, information the child would like to share. Sometimes the child will want to share information themselves or will have an adult FGC participant share for them.

The meeting is conducted in a neutral location and begins with introductions, information sharing by the social worker and coordinator, and an opportunity for the child to share. The private family time occurs next, during which the family develops the family plan. The coordinators reported that due to the preparation prior to the meeting, the plans are generally in sync with the strengths and needs of the family. The coordinators refer families to resources as needed and follow up with the family to determine their progress in completing their family plan. The case is closed when the family and the coordinator determine that the plan has been completed successfully.

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<sup>9</sup> The 12-month follow-up was selected due to voluntary cases being open for 6 months.

<sup>10</sup> This allows the coordinator to share information openly with everyone invited to the FGC meeting.

<sup>11</sup> The North Carolina Family Assessment Scale assesses family functioning in the domains of environment, parental capabilities, family interactions, family safety, and child well-being.

<sup>12</sup> The Friend Protective Factors Survey is a pre-post evaluation tool for use with caregivers receiving child maltreatment prevention services that measures protective factors in five areas: family functioning/resiliency, social support, concrete support, nurturing and attachment, and knowledge of parenting/child development.

**Co-location of coordinators:** When referrals were not submitted to Families United as required by the MOA (see challenges for detailed information), the Advisory Committee sought, via the CWS liaison, and was granted approval from CWS for the coordinators to have a desk in the CWS offices. The coordinators were co-located in two CWS offices in the county. According to the coordinators, being co-located allowed them to attend and participate in multidisciplinary team meetings with CWS social workers, discuss cases with the assigned social worker, participate in case planning, and promote the project as a beneficial service to families served by CWS. FGC staff reported that they believe if co-location had occurred earlier in the grant period, CWS staff would have referred more families to the program and more families would have benefited from FGC.

**Permanency roundtables and FGC:** Under the direction of Casey Family Programs, Families United conducted Permanency Roundtables<sup>13</sup> for 10 youth regarding a permanent family resource or a permanent connection. In addition to the Permanency Roundtable, Family Finding<sup>14</sup> was used to locate family members who may be a resource for each youth. Once family was located, the family members and the youth were invited to participate in an FGC meeting with the goal of establishing permanency with a family member for the youth. Project staff reported that the Permanency Roundtables, and subsequent FGCs, were successful in establishing permanency for all the youth and transitioning them out of residential care into a placement with family.

**Toolkit:** The project evaluators, in conjunction with the advisory team, developed a toolkit that will provide other grantees, as well as entities considering applying for a demonstration grant, with guidance on how to work with community partners on a grant and how to sustain effective collaboration in a research-based project. The toolkit, which will be submitted with Families United's final report, includes worksheets to guide grant planning and questions to prompt discussions. The second section of the toolkit provides guidance on how to assess capacity and how to determine if the right people and agencies are included in the grant process. Finally, the toolkit provides information on project sustainability.

## Challenges

The initial challenge of Families United was the delay in starting service provision. This delay was due to the community partners not signing the MOA promptly, as well as a delay in obtaining approval from the Western Institutional Review Board.

The primary challenge experienced by the project was the lack of referrals received from CWS. San Diego CWS is divided into regions and each region operates differently. Although the county MOA required that all voluntary cases be referred to Families United automatically, not all voluntary cases were referred. The CWS representative to the Families United Advisory Board provides CWS data to YMCA Families United monthly. Early in the project, the data were compared to a report in the YMCA Efforts to Outcomes database that listed the total number of referrals received from each region. The comparison of the two reports showed that the PGC program did not receive any referrals from two of the regions. The CWS representative and the FGC program director addressed the issue and, eventually, these regions began to submit the referrals and other regions became more consistent in submitting referrals; however, the number of referrals from CWS was not consistent and eventually, after obtaining approval from the Children's Bureau federal program officer, the project expanded to other CWS case types and other referral sources (as discussed earlier in this report).

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<sup>13</sup> A permanency roundtable is a structured, professional case consultation that examines the barriers to establishing permanency for a child in out-of-home placement and results in a plan to expedite permanency for the child.

<sup>14</sup> Family Finding uses various methods and strategies to locate and engage relatives of children currently living in out-of-home care with the goal of connecting children with a family member.

FGC program staff also had challenges coordinating home visits and FGC meetings with CWS social workers. As mentioned previously, the ideal was for the family group coordinator to conduct a joint home visit with the CWS social worker; however, frequently an extended amount of time would lapse between the date of the referral and the first joint home visit. This was due to challenges in getting responses from the CWS social workers via phone or email, as well as general coordination of schedules. In addition, CWS social workers frequently were not available to participate in the FGC meeting with program staff and the families due to coordinating schedules and, in some instances, CWS social workers are not able to work on weekends due to union regulations. In order to resolve the issues, FGC obtained approval for the coordinators to conduct the initial home visit and the FGC meeting without CWS social workers being present. As a result, coordinators were able to begin providing services to families more expeditiously.

## **Lessons Learned**

Project staff reported that the project was able to overcome these barriers and meet its objective of testing the intervention. Additionally, staff reported that YMCA Families First's prior relationship with CWS, and the CWS liaison, helped in the collaboration process and allowed for open communication between management staff.

Project staff mentioned some lessons they learned during the grant process, including the following:

- Co-locate project staff as part of the model in order to develop relationships and provide project staff more access to social workers and case information
- Before the project begins, present project information to frontline staff, supervisors, and upper level management to determine if everyone thinks it is feasible
- Ensure someone on the project staff and the advisory board is knowledgeable about and has relationships with local child welfare staff
- Have a contingency plan in case there is an issue with securing the sample size needed to inform the research

In addition, project staff questioned if voluntary cases were the best type of cases for FGC. In the opinion of several staff members, families in voluntary cases had a more difficult time seeing the value in the FGC process; however, FGC program staff believe that FGC meetings, in conjunction with the Permanency Roundtables and Family Finding, is an ideal use of the model with initial anecdotal outcomes supporting this belief.

## **OUTCOMES**

### **Evaluation**

The project evaluation is being conducted by Harder and Company, Community Research. The evaluation team has been partners with the YMCA since the beginning of the grant process and assisted in designing the project and the evaluation process. At the time of the site visit, Harder and Company was conducting the data analyses and looking closely at outcomes and fidelity measures. Data on case outcomes were not available at the time of the site visit, but will be included in the project's final report. The evaluators stressed that the data, when available, will not convey the actual success of the project. The success of the project, according to the evaluators, is actually heard in the stories told by the families in the follow-up calls and by the coordinators who work with the families.

According to the evaluation team, the project has experienced strong collaboration with the core entities remaining involved since the onset of the project. In addition, the evaluation team reported that the project is maximizing the use of data. The evaluators worked diligently to make the data collection and reporting user-friendly. The advisory group, which included the evaluation team, reviewed data monthly to maintain and ensure fidelity, as well as to inform decisions about the project.

The evaluators reported that the evaluation uses both process and outcome evaluations. The process evaluation assesses the implementation of the project, fidelity to the model, integration of FGC into the CWS process, and the achievement of project goals. The outcome evaluation uses the randomized controlled trial design to assess the effectiveness of the FGC compared with the typical CWS processes. The outcomes evaluation examines improvements in child and family well-being and the capacity to resolve the issues that led to CWS involvement.

To assess the project, evaluation questions were developed in two categories: system and family/child. The system evaluation questions include the following:

- How well can the FGC intervention be integrated successfully into the CWS team decision-making process?
- How does the integration of FGC influence overall practice in the child welfare system?

The family/child evaluation questions include the following:

- What is the effectiveness of an FGC intervention compared with the traditional CWS process in decreasing the number of children who enter/reenter the formal foster care system?
- What is the effectiveness of an FGC intervention compared with the traditional CWS process in increasing the capacity of families to care for their children (by increasing protective factors), promote stability, and avoid contact with CWS?
- What is the effectiveness of an FGC intervention compared with the traditional CWS process in strengthening family connections, including with fathers and paternal relatives?
- What is the effectiveness of an FGC intervention compared with the traditional CWS process in increasing placement stability for children in or at risk of being in formal foster care?
- What is the effectiveness of an FGC intervention compared with the traditional CWS process in increasing family capacity to advocate for their needs?
- What is the effectiveness of an FGC intervention compared with the traditional CWS process in increasing family knowledge of available resources and capacity to access services?
- Are there placement issues (i.e., issues that merit a review of a child's placement) for which FGC is more effective?
- Is FGC differentially effective for sub-populations (e.g., Spanish-speaking families, families living in both rural and urban areas?)

The data sources required to answer these questions are interviews and tools used and/or developed for/by the project, including the following:

- Qualitative Study (consists of stakeholder interviews with CWS staff) and Project Toolkit
- FGC Fidelity Checklist—completed by YMCA Coordinator/CWS staff—ensures fidelity to the model
- Family Group Conferencing Survey—completed by biological parent or child's primary caregiver
- ETO Database—developed by the evaluators
  - Outreach activities – trainings, workshops, number of workshop/training attendees
  - Referrals to service providers – from CWS and from YMCA staff to service providers
  - Service provision – date and type of family contact and service delivered by YMCA staff
- North Carolina Family Assessment Scale – General and Reunification Services—baseline administered by YMCA coordinator to treatment group
- Friends Protective Factors Survey – baseline and 1 year from initial involvement
- San Diego County CWS Data System – CWS provides de-identified data by matching with the county ID included in the CWS referral form to YMCA

The final report for this grant project is available through the Child Welfare Information Gateway library at <http://tinyurl.com/pgoyhnc>.

**Attachments:**

- [\*A Practical Guide for Planning and Sustaining Demonstration Projects\*](#)



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau

