

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – FGDM – Enhanced Family Conferencing Initiative
TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Michael Ashram and Jessica Rothschuh, Administration for Children’s Services (New York City); Belinda Contreras, Michelle Chapman, and Elliot Williams, Center for Human Development and Family Services

00:00:00 [Music Introduction]

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You’ll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:33]: Welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, everyone. Tom Oates, here, and we’re focusing again on Family Group Decision Making. Now, in this episode, we’re going to look at how experienced and trained peers are helping families in New York City going through Family Group Decision Making.

[00:00:51]: In August of 2015, the city’s Administration for Children Services was awarded a Children’s Bureau grant, to create what’s called the Enhanced Family Conference Initiative, EFCI. It’s a three year grant implementing Family Group Decision Making within about eight neighborhoods in the Bronx. Now, using Parent Navigators or Parent Partners is not entirely new to Child Welfare practice - in fact, ACS has been using peers called Parent Advocates, since late 2013 to work with families engaged with Child Protective Services teams during an initial Child Safety Conference. But here’s the major difference with EFCI - Parent Advocates aren’t just there at the initial conference - they stick with the families and form deeper, more supportive relationships during that family’s entire engagement with the Child Welfare system.

[00:01:42]: Now, the Parent Advocates are actually part of a contract ACS has with the Center for Human Development and Family Services. Now there’s a lot to pull apart here, from the ACS side, diving into the implementation and measuring all the impacts of EFCI - to the Parent Advocates themselves, discussing the dance that they have to navigate in tandem with CPS to work with the client families and how they straddle the lines between emotional support, and giving the families - as you’ll hear - a reality check.

[00:02:13]: So, we got everyone on the phone to talk about it. You’ll hear from Michael Ashram, the EFCI project director and Jessica Rothschuh, the Executive Director of Strategy, Innovation and Planning for ACS’s Division of Policy Planning and Measurement, along with three EFCI Parent Advocates - Belinda Contreras, Michelle Chapman and Elliot Williams. We start everything off with Michael Arsham and Jessica Rothschuh.

[00:02:41]: So, Michael and Jessie, take us all the way back to the beginning here, take us to August 2015 and talk to me about the creation of and how the Enhanced Family Conferencing Initiative has gotten off the ground.

MICHAEL ASHRAM [00:02:54]: Okay, so it was in December of 2013 that the larger city-wide Parent Advocate Initiative went live and we operationalized the commitment to make a Parent Advocate available to every parent in every Child Safety Conference city-wide. Based on some of the early success

of that initiative we applied to ACS for the Enhanced Family Conference Initiative and we were awarded that grant in August of 2015, is that correct?

JESSICA ROTHSCHUH [00:03:30]: Yes, and I think you know, we were working with our research partners on Family Group Decision Making and we saw this as a real opportunity to take a process that is essentially already mirrored in our Child Safety Conferences and really add this enhanced component that provides a level of support that families, we haven't been able - financially - to offer families. So, this funding has made it possible for us to support families in a new way.

TOM OATES [00:04:01]: And of course, Family Group Decision Making is being deployed across the nation in a lot of different ways. So, you guys, now have mentioned twice right there Child Safety Conferences - explain to me a little bit about what those are and why those are so unique.

MICHAEL ASHRAM [00:04:17]: Sure. So, in the mid-2000's, ACS adopted a model of practice called Improved Outcomes for Children - IOC, for short - which is grounded in family team conferencing and Family Group Decision Making at different points in the life of a case. The first of these conferences, and possibly the most crucial, is the initial Child Safety Conference, and that's the conference that's convened at a point in time when there's an active Child Protective investigation and where concerns about child safety have risen to the level where we're contemplating court action - including possible removal of a child from their family - and with the inception of initial Child Safety Conferencing, in most cases, we have that conversation with the family - prior to court - we invite the family into the borough office and lay out, you know, these are our safety concerns, this is why we feel like an intervention may be necessary at this point and these are some of the steps that you could take to mitigate these concerns, and some of the services that we feel your family might need or some of the measures that you can take to assure child safety.

[00:05:47]: That's the concept of the initial Child Safety Conference and, obviously, you know, a lot of our involvement with the family flows from that point and decisions made at that point will have a very heavy influence on the life of the case.

TOM OATES [00:06:04]: Are you finding at that point that you're able to involve the family in terms of planning and decision making and, kind of, setting goals? Or is that just the initial, kind of, explaining the situation, and kind, of stressing how important it is?

MICHAEL ASHRAM [00:06:19]: It's intended to be a decision making meeting and it takes place in real-time, where the safety concerns are urgent and so, it is very much a planning meeting with action steps following and that was part of the rationale for involving Parent Advocates in these conferences, it's, I mean, it's, you know, most parents would say it's good that you're extending an opportunity to discuss these concerns before taking some kind of course of action but if you put yourself in that parent's position, it's pretty terrifying, it's, you're being called into a room full of Child Protection personnel and professionals, and basically being asked to explain why we shouldn't remove your children.

[00:07:13]: Parents need support at that point in time - they need somebody to help guide them through that process, to orient them to their rights and responsibilities, and also to discuss their options with them and that's the role of Parent Advocate.

[00:07:32]: The Parent Advocates are, a large percentage of them have been the subject of a Child Protection investigation, so, they have a, you know, a clear first-hand sense of how parents in that situation are feeling and what it takes to help them focus and participate productively in the conference process. Not all of our Parent Advocates have exactly that kind of experience, but, all of them have some related experience - they may be survivors of domestic violence relationships, they may be, they be addicts in recovery, they may be parents who've raised children with special behavioral and learning needs - and so, they all have some basis on which to connect with parents who are facing similar challenges.

[00:08:33]: The Enhanced Family Conferencing Initiative is focused, at first, on the initial Child Safety Conference, and that's where the parent will first meet the Parent Advocate, but one of the enhancements is that the Parent Advocate will follow that family to a second conference, called a follow up conference, which usually take place about thirty days after the initial, and they'll do some work activities with them in the interim; about ten hours' worth of work activities in those first thirty days - a lot of which will have to do with helping the family make solid connections with whatever resources they were referred to as a result of the initial Child Safety Conference.

JESSICA ROTHSCHUH [00:09:21]: So, what's so wonderful is, prior to EFCI, our Parent Advocates were only able to support the family at the initial Child Safety Conference, it was really one shot. Now, we're able to have that Parent Advocate providing support to the families to follow up on their safety plan, and that can include things like visiting the home and talking with the family about the process of Child Safety Conferencing, it can include walking families to their appointments with various service providers and sending them text messages and calls to make sure that they're continuing to follow through and achieve outcomes.

MICHAEL ASHRAM [00:09:58]: And it's really input from the Parent Advocates themselves that inspired the federal proposal for the Enhanced Family Conferencing Initiative, because they were pointing this out as a weakness in our model, is that it was so one-shot and that parents were connecting with them, were calling them after the conferences and saying "Could you accompany me to court?, Could you accompany me to this or that appointment?, Could you come with me to my follow up conference?" and the Parent Advocates were having to say, "Well, no, you know we can't, we just - contractually and in terms of budget - we're not authorized and we're not reimbursed for doing that.", but they saw it as a real missed opportunity for engagement and so it was really based on their feedback that we felt this would be a good direction in which to go, a good enhancement, which if, you know, our theory is that it will improve outcomes and if we can document that then, you know, that's very valuable information in terms of how we carry this model forward into the future.

[00:11:16]: Some of the value that we've seen in this approach is that the Parent Advocates can engage parents in the conference process in the most authentic way imaginable, I mean, they can look at another parent and say, look, I know how you feel, I know what you're going through, I've been there, I know that you're scared and you're angry and you're confused and you have a right to feel that way. I felt that way and I wish that somebody had offered me the opportunity to talk these issues through earlier in the life of my case, you have that opportunity now, and I'm here to help you. And it's very, it really helps to defuse some of the tension that parents feel coming into these conferences, it really helps them to feel like they have somebody on their side and they're not just being outnumbered and railroaded, and that they can use the conference process productively guided by somebody who has the most relevant life experience possible.

[00:12:24]: The Parent Advocates also have real encyclopedic knowledge of local resources - they're all either from the communities in which they work, or have some long-term, intergenerational relationship with those communities - so they know the service providers, not just as providers themselves, but as consumers of services, they know who's responsive to referrals, who has a six month waiting list, they know who to speak to or what to say. The example that I'm always using is thinking of one conference - this was actually prior to EFCI - where the Child Protective team, it was a drug-exposed newborn and the Child Protective team was insisting that the only way to avoid removal would be for the mother and the infant to enter a mother-infant residential drug treatment program.

[00:13:20]: Now, as you may know, those slots are really at a premium, there's maybe 500 in the whole state of New York, it can be very difficult to leverage one of those beds, but the Parent Advocate who happened to be at the table that day had been in one of these programs for eighteen months, she had extended family-like relationships with program personnel, she knew exactly who to speak to and what to say and she was able to negotiate a bed for that mother and child, right from the conference table - something many experienced professionals would not have been equipped to do. So, that's you know, that's the level of knowledge and skill that some of these Parent Advocates bring to the table.

TOM OATES [00:14:03]: How are the Child Protective teams working with their Parent Advocates? What kind of support is ACS providing those advocates?

MICHAEL ASHRAM [00:14:11]: Well, the support comes through training and through, we have monthly implementation team meetings, in which the Parent Advocates are active participants, they report in on their experiences and their feedback shapes the model going forward, their feedback is crucial because they're, you know, they're our eyes and ears on the ground along with the Child Protective specialists and facilitators. They train together and that was, that was also an idea that stemmed from conversations with Parent Advocates where they said we'd like to train side by side with the Child Protective personnel who are going to be staffing these conferences, so that we'll have a shared understanding of conference protocol and something we can refer to during the course of the conference if we feel that somebody is deviating from that protocol, we can point out citations in the training manuals that we both used prior to doing this conference together and also, to build a sense of camaraderie with Child Protective personnel, that we're all working towards the same goals. We want to be able to say to the parents, that you know, look, we work with ACS, we don't work for ACS, we work for you, we work for the community, but we do work in partnership with ACS. We do see it as our task to implement service plans that are agreed upon in these meetings and not to deviate from them and if there's some, if there's some difficulty in implementing the service plan that was agreed upon, we'll take that back to the Child Protective team and we'll say, you know, this is the roadblock that we've hit in Plan A, what's Plan B? We don't go off and develop Plan B by ourselves, we do it as part of a team.

JESSICA ROTHSCHUH [00:16:15]: And, in addition our program team as part of the grant is also providing coaching to each of the Parent Advocates and coaching to them as a team on an ongoing manner so that they continue to learn new skills and hone the ones that they've developed in training.

TOM OATES [00:16:32]: So, talk to me about how long these folks, how do you sustain this? This is, you mentioned, there's a ton of emotional support here, this is not an easy job. How are you guys able to sustain and maintain these groups, especially because of how valuable their experience is?

MICHAEL ASHRAM [00:16:51]: So, you know, I don't want to jinx this, but I'm very happy to say there's been no turnover in this cadre of Parent Advocates, of EFCI Parent Advocates, there was one who gave birth during the initiative and went on maternity leave and was, had phone contact with clients during her maternity leave, but that's it, I mean, the three of them have really been with us from the beginning and I get a pretty clear sense that barring anything unforeseen that they're in it for the duration.

[00:17:29]: It's, you know, I've worked with Parent Advocates for a long time and there's just something about the transformative power of taking, you know, one of the worst incidents in your life and somehow parlaying it into a career and where you're helping others in your community and where you're, you know, making something worthwhile out of something that you didn't want or expect, but that happened and they find it very fulfilling, very healing, very motivating and the, I think, the agency that we contract with, Center for Human Development and Family Services, made some very astute choices, they identified some very appropriate candidates for EFCI and I think that, you know, their longevity bares that out.

TOM OATES [00:18:28]: So, now, I want to bring in the Parent Advocates from CHDFS. So we have Elliot Williams, Michelle Chapman and Belinda Contreras. And, Elliot, let me start with you and start with the training that you have to go through for EFCI. So, give me a sense of what the types of trainings that are required for you and other Parent Advocates to participate in EFCI.

ELLIOT WILLIAMS [00:18:49]: So, we do multiple trainings at our home agency, at CHDFS, dealing with crisis and what ACS considers to be dangers versus risk. We also do a lot of trainings with ACS themselves on the same matters, equality and risk trainings, elevated risk trainings, things of that nature.

TOM OATES [00:19:14]: And so, Michelle, how is that training different from the standard Parent Advocate training that you have to go through?

MICHELLE CHAPMAN [00:19:20]: Because it's more detail oriented, it's specific in terms of what we may consider risks and what ACS may consider risks, the differences. It points out responsibility of each party. It's a little more detailed and specific to situations, as well. It details how, you know, protocol for going in a client home, and recognizing, like Elliot said, the difference between a risk and a concern.

TOM OATES [00:19:52]: And, Michelle, you're hitting on something that I wanted to talk about. So, because you have to have this unique relationship with the families, I'd like to dig into that a little bit. Tell me about the types of relationships that Parent Advocates actually have with those families.

MICHELLE CHAPMAN [00:20:07]: The relationship is more so, almost like mentoring and supporting, supportive, like a support system, extra support system for them, because a lot of times, they cannot get in touch with their ACS worker, so they'll call us if they, you know, need something, they'll call us. If they need advice, we're there for them. And then, we've all at some point had involved with ACS, we have an extra level of knowledge that can assist them to get through these things. So, it's a mentoring and a nurturing kind of support system that we have with our clients.

TOM OATES [00:20:47]: So, across all these families, are there some areas that you're seeing common, you know, common across all the families, do they have common questions for you or do you see common needs?

MICHELLE CHAPMAN [00:20:57]: Common questions. You know, it varies parent, family to family, so, it's kind of hard to say. I mean, everyone wants to know how long are we going to be involved with ACS - I guess that could be common, that's a common question that they would want to know, how long do we have to do this. Another common question may be can we change our worker, you know, another common question might be could you help me with securing a program, something like that.

TOM OATES [00:21:32]: So, you're not only tapping on your own personal experiences, you know in mentoring and sharing of those experiences - but there's also the assistance you have to provide to navigate this entire system, you know, working with ACS, you know, going through the court system and such. So, Belinda, I'd like to give listeners a sense of what other agencies should be looking for if they were thinking about bringing in Parent Advocates. Can you give me a sense of how your personal experience actually supports the work you do?

BELINDA CONTRERAS [00:22:00]: Well, my background comes from mental health. I have a teenager with ED, emotional disturbance, and working with the families, I can really understand what they're going through.

TOM OATES [00:22:13]: So, let me follow up on that. As this connects to something Michelle said. You're part of the triangle, you know the family, the Parent Advocates, and ACS - so where is that hand off between you and ACS to make sure that everything to help the family is happening and that nothing is being missed?

BELINDA CONTRERAS [00:22:31]: Well, having a relationship with the CPS worker is very important and being open about helping the family and also being truthful with the parent.

TOM OATES [00:22:41]: So, talk to me about that team and how you guys actually work together. Elliot, give me a sense of how you're working with ACS to make sure that these cases move forward accordingly.

ELLIOT WILLIAMS [00:22:52]: Well, we usually just share our information with the worker as we run into each other. So I maybe go in the back and talk to Ruth at her desk because I have information about something that a client is interested in doing, but CPS has to approve it. Or, the client may have to go to a program and I'll go with them that morning so then I can come back and inform the CPS worker that the client is actively engaged in that program. And things of that nature. So, it's a continuous communication or dance between all three parties involved and part of it is to keep the parent focused on the realism of things versus the expectation of things, because sometimes the expectation they'll think, okay the CPS worker said that I need to go to rehab, but I have 90 days before I have to go to rehab and it's like, no really, you have like, a week, so let's get this done.

TOM OATES [00:23:49]: You have to be the liaison for them, don't you, throughout the system and working with ACS, but you also have to continuously provide that reality check.

MICHELLE CHAPMAN [00:23:57]: Always, you always have to have a reality check with the parent, always.

TOM OATES [00:24:03]: So, tell me about the challenges. Talk to me about those daily struggles and hurdles that you have to overcome every day to perform your job.

MICHELLE CHAPMAN [00:24:11]: The biggest challenge, I would say with some parents, because not all parents are able or willing to engage, in terms of relationships, some parents just, they're overwhelmed and a Parent Advocate is just one extra person that they just cannot afford to give any more energy to. So, you know, one challenge is engaging some of our parents and the next challenge would be engaging the workers to come to a consensus about that particular client and the things that we need for that particular client. Looking for the workers, sometimes there are things the client may disclose that we need to find the worker, sometimes reaching the worker is hard because they're very busy, they're overloaded with cases and court all the time, doing all kinds of visits. So, yeah, the challenge would be engaging some parents that don't want to be bothered, as well as finding workers to speak to about the case, those are two major challenges for me, in terms of relationship.

TOM OATES [00:25:18]: So, with those challenges you have to overcome, what's the support that you're getting? How does CHDFS support the Parent Advocates?

ELLIOT WILLIAMS [00:25:26]: Oh, CHDFS provides tons and tons of support. Nancy and Oscar, even Julio are completely accessible at any time, day or night. They provide us with all of the necessities we need to get things done. We also have the briefings that we hold so that we can discuss things that are going on with cases and bounce ideas off of each other.

TOM OATES [00:25:52]: So, what does that support look like? I mean, can you give me an example?

ELLIOT WILLIAMS [00:25:55]: So, if like, if I'm having an issue where, say emotionally, I just, it's a lot going on with the case, I'm able to reach out and express that with my superiors. There's been times with cases that we've split, there's been domestic violence cases and maybe the first person will do the first half and in reality the person may have done something really heinous, they still deserve a Parent Advocate, so in turn, I may take the second half of the case, or Michelle may take the second half of the case because if I feel that emotionally I'm not completely able to support this parent in their best interest and the best way I know how, we'll piggy back off of each other.

TOM OATES [00:26:42]: So, guys, I know it's early, but what are those participants, what are the families, what are the Advocates, what are the agency staff telling you about how EFCI is actually working? What are you hearing in terms of, you know, qualitative data or anecdotes?

MICHAEL ASHRAM [00:27:01]: The initial feedback has been very positive from front line staff. When we were first rolling it out and planning it, there was some resistance to the idea of the private family time, the caucusing, there were safety concerns about that, it was feared that it would lengthen the time needed for the conference, that it would interfere with other work activities, some of the conferences are followed by court activity and people were afraid that they would be caught in a time crunch and so, that was some of the initial concern, but as we rolled it out on the ground, we began to hear something very different from the front line staff and almost universally for the past year, and you know, some odd months, they've been saying that they really like the private family time a lot, because

they feel as if they're not making decisions about families unilaterally, they're making decisions with families who have extra guidance from people who know about community resources and, you know, and this may sound like Social Work 101, but it has been part of our learning curve, is that families are much more likely to comply with service plans that are grounded in their own self-expressed needs, that are not cookie cutter, just - you know take a parenting class, give clean urine for a year - but that really address, like, issues that they identify in their lives as impacting child safety, be it improved housing, day care, special education, whatever the case may be, compliance becomes less of an issue when you're operationalizing a plan that the family played a large part in creating. And so, I think a lot of the front line staff really appreciate that; that we're not just you know, trying to force compliance with measures that families may or may not want. We're watching them effectuate plans that they themselves have developed.

TOM OATES [00:29:18]: Yeah, ownership means everything, especially when it's truly relatable and customized and you're dealing with a family that was key in customizing that plan. So, how do you evaluate this? What are those key metrics that you're looking for that you will use when you're measuring the effectiveness of this grant and ECFI in general, or EFCI in general?

JESSICA ROTHSCHUH [00:29:42]: Well, we're using, we have two major sources of data, one is our outcome data for families, of course, that's what, you know, what everybody wants to know. Through our Enhanced Parent Advocates and our Family Group Decision Making Process, these are the outcomes for families, are families staying together, are they following through with services, do we see repeated maltreatment rates dropping, do we see repeat investigations dropping? And those are things that we really won't know until the end of our three year grant. But, we're also, we're also we just implemented our first general staff survey, which is really a more qualitative measure of how our initiative is going. So, those are more questions about how did you enjoy working with the Parent Advocate? Was the Parent Advocate able to help you? From the staff's perspective, what did caucusing and allowing the family to be more involved in the service plan do? Did you change your mind about what you thought the outcome of the conference would be based on the family and the Parent Advocate's participation? So, we're really looking right now at those more qualitative measures of the impacts of our program.

TOM OATES [00:30:55]: If you could go back, go back about three years, or really, even earlier when all of this really kind of got off the ground, what would be the advice you would give yourself then? What would be the things you would do differently, or what would be the things you would make sure got done?

JESSICA ROTHSCHUH [00:31:11]: You know, I think the biggest thing was, you know, we didn't want to involve folks on the ground too heavily in the planning, because we weren't sure if we would get a grant. So, I think we had to end up doing a lot of trust building and co-design work in the beginning that slowed down the implementation a little bit. And if I could go back, I think allowing the, our front line staff and their leadership in our local office to drive the design of the model and their involvement a little bit more in the very beginning as we were crafting what the project was going to look like, that we were proposing, I think that would have really helped us to get a head start on the implementation.

TOM OATES [00:31:55]: Best case scenario, sky's the limit, what else is on the horizon for what the next phase would look like if you had your druthers?

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MICHAEL ASHRAM [00:32:04]: You know, getting way ahead of myself, but if I had my druthers, the evaluation documents, the improved outcomes generated as a result of this model, document the cost-effectiveness, the positive qualitative feedback and this becomes the model for Parent Advocate participation in Family Team Conferencing city-wide - it's no longer an enhancement, it's a baseline model that we further enhance.

TOM OATES [00:32:36]: The way you guys have described it and what we're hearing, it sounds like you guys are creating, at least at the initial stages a great case for that. Thank you guys, so much for your time, I thank you guys for being a part of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

MICHAEL ASHRAM [00:32:50]: Thank you for your interest, really appreciate it.

TOM OATES [00:32:56]: A couple of things about the Parent Advocates with EFCI. While most of ACS's Parent Advocates who provide services at those initial Child Safety Conferences are per diem contract staff, Michelle, Belinda and Elliot are full-time employees. So, they're able to have much greater connection to the CPS teams that they work with and provide continuous support to the families. And they're also the original three Parent Advocates for EFCI, so there's been no turnover of staff. And, also for the first year and a half of EFCI, from what Jessica told us after we recorded, the Parent Advocates were part of one hundred family meetings, so they are definitely putting in full-time hours.

[00:33:39]: Now, we're seeing Family Group Decision Making being implemented in so many ways, so for another example, I encourage you to check out another podcast we did, hearing how another Children's Bureau grantee in Arizona uses the Family Conferencing model developed by the Kempe Center.

[00:33:55]: Now, if you visit this podcast's webpage at acf.hhs.gov/cb, just search 'podcasts', we'll point you to some examples of Family Group Decision Making we've got for you over on Child Welfare Information Gateway. I really appreciate the folks from New York City's Administration for Children Services and the folks from the Center for Human Development and Family Services. They couldn't have been more accommodating in bringing everyone together. So, my thanks to Michael Ashram, Jessie Rothschild, Belinda Contreras, Michelle Chapman and Elliot Williams for all their time and energy to share with us what they're doing with the Enhanced Family Conferencing Initiative.

[00:34:34]: So, please check out childwelfare.gov for additional information to support your work in Child Welfare, whether you're looking for services and information to share with families, tools and best practices to share with your colleagues or staff, or to learn what other states and agencies are up to, check out Child Welfare Information Gateway. And thanks so much for listening to this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast, I'm Tom Oates. Have a great day!

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:35:04]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.