

Site Visit Report: North Florida Child Welfare - Early Education Partnership

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Award #: 90CO1065

Cluster: Early Education Partnerships to Expand Protective Factors for Children With Child Welfare Involvement

Grantee: Family Support Services of North Florida, Inc.

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SUMMARY

In 2010, a group of human services agencies in Duval County, Florida, evaluated the services offered to children in the community who were between birth and the age of 3, and were also involved with child welfare. Although there were services available for school-age children and youth in transition (18 to 23 years of age), there were very few coordinated services available for preschool children. With the Family Support Services of North Florida (FSSNF) as the lead agency, the group focused on providing services for young children in foster care through a 17-month grant within the Children's Bureau's Child Welfare - Early Education Partnerships to Expand Protective Factors for Children with Child Welfare Involvement grant cluster. The Child Welfare-Early Education Partnership (CW-EEP) was formed, and its primary objective was to improve child care and early education services for young children in foster care, thereby improving educational outcomes for these children, and to increase the number of children in foster care enrolled in high-quality early education programs.

It was determined that the following issues existed and would need to be addressed:

- Caregivers and child welfare caseworkers did not clearly understand the benefits and importance of early childhood education.
- Caregivers and child welfare caseworkers were not aware of the local resources available to help children access high-quality early childhood education programs.
- Agencies mutually serving this population of children had limited interaction and few guidelines for working together.
- Child welfare caseworkers and child care providers had limited interaction or exchange of information about jointly served children.
- Child care subsidy referrals were not consistently processed.

The project implemented several strategies, including the following:

Electronic child care subsidy application process: The CW-EEP developed a process for online completion and submission of the child care subsidy application that allows caseworkers to track the approval process. Project staff indicated that the new process holds both entities accountable for the application and approval process.

Training:

- Foster parents – One night of PRIDE¹ training is dedicated to teaching prospective foster parents about the importance of early childhood education and high-quality child care; why and how to select high-quality child care and early education providers; and the Guiding Stars² program. In addition, a short training video describing the importance and benefits of early education, key indicators of quality child care and early education programs, and local service providers was developed by the project.
- Child welfare caseworkers – The initial training for child welfare caseworkers includes a 2-hour presentation on the benefits of early childhood education.

¹ PRIDE is the training for prospective foster parents.

² The Guiding Stars program is a voluntary quality rating improvement system of child care providers in Duval County (<http://elcofduval.org/g sod.asp>).

- Child care center staff – The role of the child welfare caseworker and the child protective service process is described to child care and early education services staff in Child Welfare 101 training. Training on trauma-informed care and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) were provided to child care center staff, as well. PBIS is a classroom management technique used with children who have behavioral issues.
- Early education specialists – These specialists participated in a 5-day train-the-trainer course in PBIS.

Foster parent requirement: Prior to being licensed, prospective foster parents are required to explore, select, and contact three child care providers from the Guiding Stars program to discuss using their services if a child under 5 years of age is placed in their home.

CW-EEP Certification program: Child care providers can participate in the certification program and become preferred providers for young children in foster care. The child care directors participate in a 10-hour training course that includes Child Welfare 101, trauma-informed care, and PBIS. The child care director then presents a 2-hour summary training to their staff.

Tracking system for young children in child care: CW-EEP developed a data system to ensure the number of children in foster care enrolled in Early Head Start, Head Start, or other quality child care programs was collected on a regular basis.

The project's goal for increased enrollment of children in quality early childhood programs was 20 percent. The project far exceeded this goal—enrollment in quality early childhood programs increased 52 percent during the 17-month grant period.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: North Florida Child Welfare-Early Education Partnership" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As part of a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) grant awarded in 2011, Family Support Services of North Florida, the lead agency for child welfare in Duval County, FL, partnered with the Early Learning Coalition (ELC) of Duval County, the lead agency for child care in Duval County, as well as other agencies that provide services to young children in foster care, to create the Child Welfare-Early Education Partnership. The goal of CW-EEP was to improve child care and early education services for young children in foster care, thereby improving educational outcomes for these children, and to increase the number of children in foster care enrolled in high-quality early education programs.

Prior to the grant award, a group of community partners evaluated the services offered to the population of children in the community ages birth to 3 years. This group realized that although there were services available for school age children and youth in transition (18 to 23 years of age), there were very few coordinated services available for preschool children. The group, with FSSNF as the lead agency, focused on provision of services for young children in foster care. They applied for a grant within CB's Child Welfare - Early Education Partnerships to Expand Protective Factors for Children with Child Welfare Involvement grant cluster. The CW-EEP partnership was formed and it was determined that the following issues existed and would need to be addressed as part of the project work plan:

- Caregivers and child welfare caseworkers did not clearly understand the benefits and importance of early childhood education.
- Caregivers and child welfare caseworkers were not aware of the local resources available to help children access high-quality early childhood education programs.
- Agencies mutually serving this population of children had limited interaction and few guidelines for working together.
- Child welfare caseworkers and child care providers had limited interaction or exchange of information about jointly served children.

- Child care subsidy referrals were not consistently processed.

In order to improve the services for these children, CW-EEP developed an oversight committee, which met monthly and included representatives from all key partners. The partners signed memos of agreement with FSSNF to participate, share information, and collaborate in order to meet the goals of CW-EEP. Subcommittees were formed to address the following issues and bring back suggestions for resolution to the overall committee:

- Training
- Child well-being
- Dissemination
- Sustainability

At the end of the 17-month grant period, the CW-EEP partners signed an interagency agreement (attached) to ensure the sustainability of the project.

VIRTUAL SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The virtual site visit occurred between March 25, 2013, and June 26, 2013, via phone interviews and emails with project staff. In addition, some discussion about the project was conducted with project staff at the Children Bureau's grantees meeting held in Alexandria, Virginia, April 23–25, 2013. Interviews with the following people were conducted as part of the virtual site visit:

- Roberta Zipperer – Senior Director of Foster Care Services, FSSNF, CW-EEP Project Director
- Cynthia Harpman – Grant Specialist, FSSNF
- Ray Holt – CW-EEP Project Coordinator, FSSNF
- Erika Crosier – CW-EEP Early Education Support Specialist, FSSNF Mary I. Armstrong, Ph.D. – Associate Professor and Director, Division of State and Local Support, Department of Child and Family Studies, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, College of Behavioral and Community Sciences, University of South Florida, CW-EEP Project Evaluator
- Chad Sykes-Burns – Director of Child Care Resource Referral, ELC of Duval, CW-EEP Oversight Committee Member

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The following components of the project were discussed:

- Motivation for the project
- Successes
- Challenges
- Evaluation process
- Early results
- Sustainability

Additional information was obtained from the project's semiannual reports for the reporting periods of October 2011 through March 2012, and April 2012 through September 2013, as well as the project's final report.

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

FSSNF partnered with the ELC of Duval County, as well as other agencies that provide services to young children in foster care, to form the CW-EEP. Prior to receiving the grant award, these agencies worked together only occasionally. Through the formation of CW-EEP, the agencies built partnerships and created sustainable collaborations and information sharing. The CW-EEP project included these unique and innovative features:

Electronic child care subsidy application process: Prior to the project, child welfare caseworkers were unable to easily determine if an application for a child care subsidy was received and/or approved by the ELC. The CW-EEP developed a process for online completion and submission of the child care subsidy application that allows caseworkers to track the approval process. Project staff indicated that the new process holds both entities accountable for the application and approval process.

Training: The project developed and presented the following training:

- Foster parents – One night of PRIDE training is dedicated to teaching prospective foster parents about the importance of early childhood education and high-quality child care; why and how to select high-quality child care and early education providers; and the Guiding Stars program. Trauma-informed care training is presented to foster parents and relative caregivers. They also receive quarterly training on issues relevant to early education. A short training video describing the importance and benefits of early education, key indicators of quality child care and early education programs, and local service providers was created by CW-EEP for foster parents and kinship caregivers and is used in quarterly training.
- Child welfare caseworkers – The initial training for child welfare caseworkers includes a 2-hour presentation on the benefits of early childhood education and is presented by the ELC. In addition, in-service training relevant to early childhood education services is provided to caseworkers regularly. Training was also provided to caseworkers on the improved application process.
- Child care center staff – The role of the child welfare caseworker and the child protective service process is described to child care and early education services staff in Child Welfare 101 training. (This training is attached to this report.) Trainings on trauma-informed care and PBIS were provided to child care center staff. PBIS is a classroom management technique used with children who have behavioral issues.
- Early education specialists (who work for various agencies) – These specialists participated in a 5-day train-the-trainer course in PBIS. The specialists provided, and will continue to provide, this training to child care and early education service providers to whom they provide oversight.
- Guardians ad litem and court personnel – The training included information on the benefits of quality child care and early education services, developmental delays, and the resources available for children in the community.

Foster parent requirement: Prior to being licensed, prospective foster parents are required to explore, select, and contact three child care providers from the Guiding Stars program to discuss using their services if a child under 5 years of age is placed in their home. This process is intended to help foster parents understand the importance of high-quality child care and early education services and to have an established relationship with one or more high-quality child care providers.

Child care provider contact requirements: Prior to CW-EEP, there was limited communication between child welfare caseworkers and child care and early education services providers, and generally no information about the child care provider in a child's case record. In addition, child welfare caseworkers did not consider the child's schedule when arranging appointments and visitation. As a result, children would miss lunch, nap time, or lessons, which would be disruptive to the child care provider and the child. As a result of this project, child welfare caseworkers are now required to contact the child's child care provider within 2 weeks of receiving the case and exchange contact information and obtain a copy of the child care provider's schedule. Caseworkers are now required to consider the child care and/or early education services provider's schedule when scheduling appointments and visits with parents.

CW-EEP Certification program: Child care providers can participate in the certification program and become preferred providers for young children in foster care. The child care directors participate in a 10-hour training course that includes Child Welfare 101, trauma-informed care, and PBIS. The child care director then presents a 2-hour summary training to their child care staff. Providing this specific training is intended to reduce the number of child care disruptions due to behavioral issues exhibited by children in foster care. Giving these providers the tools to work more effectively with children who are involved with child welfare is intended to reduce the likelihood that these children will be expelled for behavior problems. In addition to receiving this training, child care providers are also rated on an environmental and educational scale. FSSNF encourages caregivers to use providers who have been certified by the CW-EEP. (The training requirements for this program are attached to this report.)

Developmental and mental health screenings: Prior to CW-EEP, young children entering foster care did not consistently receive developmental or mental health screenings. When screenings were conducted, there was no system in place to ensure the recommendations were followed. FSSNF now requires that all children coming into foster care have an initial screening using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, as well as a Child Behavioral Health Assessment, to ensure that social and emotional needs are detected. If it is determined that a child has a need, more extensive testing occurs and referrals to the appropriate providers are made. FSSNF is able to track the referrals made and the participation of the child in the appropriate treatment and/or program.

Geographic Information System: FSSNF developed a Geographic Information System to map all licensed child care providers and private providers that are quality-rated by the ELC, as well as foster parents. In addition to facilitating efficient matching of children with conveniently located, high-quality child care and early learning services, this may also make it possible for a child to remain in the same child care even when the child has to change foster placements.

Early learning program brochure: CW-EEP developed an early learning program brochure that is provided to foster parents at the time of placement of children under the age of 5 years. Prospective foster parents also receive the brochure during their initial training. The brochure describes the benefits of high-quality child care and early education services, provides information on the qualities to look for in a child care provider, and provides contact information for agencies that can provide detailed local information. (The brochure is included as an attachment to this report.)

Quality Checklist: This checklist helps families look at specific characteristics of quality child care and early education services and compare their options side-by-side. The checklist, as well as a list of Guiding Stars of Duval providers, is provided to all training participants. (The Quality Checklist is attached to this report.)

Tracking system for young children in child care: One of the initial challenges to CW-EEP was the lack of baseline data on the number of children in foster care enrolled in Early Head Start, Head Start, or other quality child care programs. CW-EEP developed a data system to ensure this information was collected on a regular basis. As a result of this system, the FSSNF Early Education Support Specialist (EESS) can identify the children who have not been enrolled in child care or early education services. If it is determined that a child has not been enrolled in child care, the EESS will contact caregivers to discuss the requirement for child care services and provide guidance on child care providers, as needed.

Challenges

One of the challenges of the CW-EEP was the lack of involvement by the Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS) provider in Duval County. According to project staff, the EHS/HS provider in Duval County had its contract terminated during the project. Its lack of involvement in the project and the diminished service provision made it more difficult to increase the number of foster children participating in those programs.

A second challenge for CW-EEP was the termination of early childhood/child care services when a child was reunited with his or her parents. In order to ensure continued services after reunification, ELC agreed to extend the child care subsidy for 6 months, although the parent is required to apply for the voucher. After this 6 months extension ends, there may be a gap in services due to the waiting list for the child care subsidy.

Thirdly, project staff reported that planning and implementing processes and programs within the 17-month grant period was a challenge. To overcome this challenge, the project applied for and was granted a no-cost extension and also was awarded an additional 24-month grant to sustain and expand the work of CW-EEP.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

According to CW-EEP staff, the project improved caregivers' and child welfare staff's understanding of the benefits of early childhood learning and of the need for high-quality child care for children in foster care. In addition, it promoted understanding of the child welfare process for child care providers and improved the communication and cooperation between child welfare and child care providers staff.

CW-EEP will continue to increase the capacity of child care providers to provide quality child care to children in foster care through its certification and training programs, and the project will be sustained through the interagency agreement (attached) that was signed by the CW-EEP partners.

Project partners identified the following keys to success:

- The leadership of the partner agencies is very supportive of the project.
- The partner agencies are committed to the project and respect the knowledge and ideas that each person brings to the project.
- The people on the oversight committee are the people who can make decisions on behalf of their agency/organization.

OUTCOMES

Evaluation

The CW-EEP evaluation was conducted by Mary I. Armstrong, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director, Division of State and Local Support, Department of Child and Family Studies, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, College of Behavioral and Community Sciences, University of South Florida. Dr. Armstrong, who wrote the evaluation plan, used various types of assessments to evaluate CW-EEP, including process evaluation, implementation analysis, and outcomes study comparison.

The process evaluation included document reviews, observations, and web-based partner collaboration surveys at the beginning of the project and again near the end of the grant period. According to Dr. Armstrong, prior to CW-EEP, child welfare services and the early learning community had very little interaction; however, since the project began, project partners have established positive relationships in which collaboration occurred and improved throughout the grant period. The partners understood each other's roles and were committed to the project. The findings of the collaboration survey confirmed Dr. Armstrong's observations. The survey examined the following:

- Interagency relationships and collaboration among participating organizations
- Common goals
- Commitment to collaboration
- Clear partner roles and responsibilities
- Sharing information, ideas, and resources
- Process for shared decision-making and conflict resolution
- Frequent and formal communication
- Mutual trust and respect among partner

Findings from the baseline assessment indicated there was considerable variation in the relationships and extent of collaboration between partner agencies and that all elements of collaboration would need to be further developed. The findings at the end of the grant period indicated that significant progress had been made in establishing collaborative processes among the CW-EEP partner agencies. The improvement in the collaboration process was further evidenced by the interagency agreement (attached) that was signed by the directors of the CW-EEP partner agencies, and which will continue to guide and institutionalize the work of the project.

The implementation analysis included assessing the strategies developed by CW-EEP to increase the number of children in foster care ages birth to 5 who are enrolled in quality child care and early education programs and to improve the skills and knowledge of those who provide services to these children. CW-EEP was successful in establishing and/or developing the following programs and policies during the grant period, which are described in the Unique and Innovative Features section of this report:

- Electronic childcare subsidy application process that allows for the online completion, submission, and tracking of the application
- Training for child care and early education service providers, foster parents, child welfare staff, and officers of the court about issues related to child care and early education services and child welfare
- Requirements, as part of the foster parent licensure process, that prospective foster parents familiarize themselves with child care and early education service providers
- Policy on contact requirements for child welfare staff and child care and early education service providers; and guidelines for removing children from the providers during hours of instruction
- CW-EEP Certification program for child care and early education service providers to become a preferred provider for young children who are in foster care
- Policy to ensure developmental and mental health screenings are completed on all young children entering foster care
- Geographic Information System to map all licensed child care and early education service providers and private providers that are quality-rated by the ELC
- Early learning program brochure that is provided to foster parents during training and again at the time of placement of children under the age of 5 years
- Quality Checklist that helps families to look at specific characteristics of quality child care and early education services and compare their options side-by-side

Based on the information provided by the project staff, the goal for increased enrollment of foster children in quality early childhood programs was 20 percent. The project far exceeded this goal—enrollment in quality early childhood programs increased 52 percent during the 17-month grant period.

Sustainability

The 15 agencies involved with the CW-EEP have signed an interagency agreement (attached) that gives the assurance that the project will continue after the grant funding ends. As part of the interagency agreement, all of the agencies agreed to the following:

- Continue participating in the CW-EEP Oversight Committee
- Provide training to party agencies, as appropriate
- Attend regularly scheduled meetings
- Participate in media events and other dissemination opportunities
- Contribute to the effort to increase the likelihood that children under the age of 5 and involved with child welfare will receive high-quality child care or early education services

In addition to these all-inclusive tasks, each agency agreed to individual assignments to sustain the project. (The interagency agreement is attached to this report.)

The project also plans to sustain and expand CW-EEP with the assistance of a second Children's Bureau grant, which continues to focus on expanding the protective factors for young children with child welfare involvement. In addition to continuing the services already established during the first grant, CW-EEP plans to expand the project to include children involved in family preservation services.

Attachments:

- Interagency Agreement
- Child Care Selection
 - Quality Checklist
 - Early learning program brochure
- Training
 - CWEENP Certification Training
 - Child Welfare 101 Training
 - The Essential Elements of Trauma-Informed Care



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