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## **I. CORE VALUES**

The fundamental purpose of Family Partnership Meetings are grounded by value-driven principles that include:

- All families have strengths;
- Families are the experts on themselves;
- Families deserve to be treated with dignity and respect;
- Families can make well-informed decisions about keeping their children safe when supported;
- Outcomes improve when families are involved in decision-making; and
- A team is often more capable of creative and high-quality decision-making than an individual.

Values related to Virginia's Family Engagement Model include:

- Outcomes improve when a comprehensive assessment of children's and families' strengths and challenges provides the foundation for engagement, service planning and delivery.
- Members of the family's own community add value to the process by serving as natural allies to the family and experts on the community's resources.
- When families are respectfully included in the decision making process in a timely manner, they are capable of identifying and participating in addressing their needs and making decisions about their children.
- Permanency planning is successful when children are connected to permanent, legal families, when youth are provided the opportunity and time to plan and prepare for independence, when supports to live independently or to make a successful transition to adult services are identified and provided, and when there is communication and collaboration among LDSS programs to ensure strong team support across the age continuum (between adult services and child welfare) and regardless of the child's goal (between CPS, foster care, and adoption).
- In order to fully participate in Family Partnership Meetings parents and youth need the time and opportunity to understand the purpose of the meeting and to be fully prepared for the group process.

## **II. GOAL**

Our goal as caring professionals is to join parents as allies in the systems of care for their children and to involve birth families and community members, along with resource

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families, service providers and agency staff, in all placement decisions, and in the prevention of placement in very high risk and high risk CPS families to ensure a network of support for the child and the adults who care for them.

### III. DEFINITION & PURPOSE

Family engagement is a relationship focused approach that provides structure for decision making and that empowers both the family and the community in the decision making process. It extends partnership messages to caregivers, providers and neighborhood stakeholders. Meetings are held for all decisions involving prevention of placement in very high and high risk CPS families, prior to a child's removal from a birth or adoptive family, prior to a change of placement, and prior to a change of goal.

Family Partnership Meetings can be convened at any time in the process of service provision. They may be requested by the birth, foster or adoptive family, legal guardian, or by agency staff. Establishing the team early in the process either at the prevention stage of service provision or prior to a child needing to be removed, can accomplish the following:

- Saves time by convening the team and preparing the family before a crisis occurs;
- Establishes a positive working relationship with the birth parents and youth,
- Sends a strong message of inclusion and partnership,
- Provides the opportunity for self-evaluation, and
- Provides support to the social worker and the family.

The Family Partnership Meeting should:

- Include birth parents, youth, other significant players identified by the birth parents and/or youth, and neighborhood-based community representatives, all of whom are invited by the public agency to participate in all family partnership meetings, especially those regarding possible child removal;
- Be led by a skilled, immediately accessible, facilitator, who is not the family's case-carrying social worker; and
- Be documented. Information about each meeting, including participants, location, and recommendations, is collected in OASIS and ultimately linked to data on child and family outcomes, in order to ensure continuing self evaluation of the Family Partnership Meeting process and its effectiveness.

Each Family Partnership Meeting after a child's removal should include all those invited to previous meetings and should include the foster and/or adoptive parents of the child, so that the birth-foster parent, legal guardian or foster parent-adoptive parent or birth-

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foster-adoptive parent relationship can be initiated and/or strengthened and expectations of all parties can be clarified.

#### IV. FAMILY PARTNERSHIP MEETING PARTICIPANTS

- Facilitator: This individual is trained to lead the group through a solution focused process. The Family Partnership Meeting must be facilitated by a trained individual that is not the social worker for the child or family. The facilitator is responsible for keeping the group focused and moving through the decision-making process, allowing family members to actively participate. The facilitator should make sure the voices of parents and youth are heard. The facilitator should communicate with the case worker connected to the child or family to identify any potential emotional or physical safety concerns that may impact the quality of the meeting. When the child is present, the facilitator must remain conscious of their well-being, promote a safe and protective environment and translate for the child, when needed. At the end of the meeting, the facilitator should provide a summary report to participants outlining decision and action steps and any follow-up needed.
- Birth parents: The birth parents should be recognized as the expert on their family's needs and strengths. Their presence and involvement is integral to the meeting. Family Partnership Meetings should not occur without family unless the purpose of the meeting is to consider an emergency placement and the decision to remove the child from the home must be made by the agency within 24 hours. Every effort should be made to involve the family and the meeting should not occur unless the family is not available or chooses not to participate. If the family is not present the reason for their absence should be well documented in OASIS.
- Caseworker connected to the family: The caseworker should first talk with their supervisor to determine whether a Family Partnership Meeting is needed for the child or family. The caseworker is responsible for making the referral for a family engagement meeting. The caseworker relays all relevant information to the facilitator that includes the purpose of the meeting, any potential physical or emotional safety concerns that may impact the meeting, and ensures both the maternal and paternal family and all individuals that are involved with the family are invited to the meeting. The caseworker should be prepared to provide information to participants about the meeting purpose and provide any information and previous services received by the family. The case worker is

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- responsible for making a decision if absence of consensus or if safety concerns are evident. Worker should assess any safety issues that may potentially come up and communicate those issues to the facilitator. If it is determined that an individual cannot participate due to safety reasons, the caseworker should talk with the facilitator to determine strategies for participation (i.e. conference call, separate meeting.) The caseworker should prepare the family for the meeting by explaining the family engagement process. The caseworker should also talk with the family to determine whether child care arrangements have been made for the family during the Family Partnership Meeting.
- Child(ren)/Youth: In deciding whether or not a child should participate, the social worker should consider the child's developmental and chronological age, the parents' suggestions and concerns, and consult with others that have a working knowledge of the child's capacity such as a therapist or counselor. There is a presumption that older youth will always participate unless there is a sound reason for them not to. It is recommended that youth 9 and older, unless otherwise determined, participate in Family Partnership Meetings. This does not preclude involving youth below age 9 if the social worker believes they have the capacity to participate. While all youth should be consulted about meeting participants, some youth may not identify whom they would like to attend.
  - Extended family and non-relative supports: Both maternal and paternal relatives as well as non-relative supports should be invited by youth, parents, and/ or the social worker as supports, to assist, and/ or to be a resource. Their participation should always be supported and encouraged. Extended family should also be asked about other individuals involved with the family that may be a potential support.
  - Current caregivers (kin, foster): These individuals should also be seen as key team members that assist in providing information regarding the child's adjustment, progress, and needs, and assist with developing ideas and reaching a decision.
  - Supervisor: The supervisor of the caseworker connected to the family is responsible for being knowledgeable of the case. The supervisor should utilize the meeting as an opportunity to assess the strengths of their worker and identify areas in need of improvement. The supervisor should serve as the expert about the process for accessing various services within their locality.

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- Community partners: These individuals are defined by their identity as a member of the family's community whether based on neighborhood, ethnicity, religion, school or other connection. They are invited by the agency and/or the birth parents, based on existing partnership to provide support, resource expertise, and an external perspective to decision-making. Their presence in the meeting must be agreed to by parents.
- Service providers: These are persons currently or previously involved with the family that should come to the meeting prepared to discuss current or previous services provided to the child and/or family and any current or future recommended service needs.
- Guardian ad litem (GAL) and CASA volunteers: These court-appointed representatives responsible for representing the child's best interest should be invited to the Family Partnership Meeting. These individuals often have useful information that can help inform the family engagement process. GALs can also give guidance and set parameters around legal issues that may be discussed during the meeting.
- Other public agency staff: This group may include home finding, independent living, family preservation staff, adoption staff, adult services staff, benefits workers or others available to provide expertise/information depending on the purpose of the meeting and the type of the Family Partnership Meeting.

## V. CONFIDENTIALITY

The confidentiality of information is emphasized and respected by all team members. However, parents should be informed that information from the meeting may be used for case planning, in subsequent court proceedings if necessary, and in the investigation of a new allegation of abuse or neglect should such information arise.

## VI. PROCESS

### A. TYPES OF FAMILY PARTNERSHIP MEETINGS REQUIRED

For every family involved with the child welfare agency these are the decision points at which a Family Partnership Meeting should be held:

1. Once a CPS investigation or Family assessment has been completed and

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the family is identified as “very high” or “high” risk and the child is at risk of out of home placement;

2. Prior to removing a child, whether emergency or considered;
3. Prior to any change of placement for a child already in care, including an disruption in the adoptive placement;
4. Prior to a change of goal; and
5. When requested by parent (birth, foster, adoptive or legal guardian), youth, or social worker.

#### B. CRITICAL DECISION POINTS FOR REQUIRED MEETINGS

##### 1. Very High or High Risk Child Assessment

This Family Partnership Meeting should be scheduled when the social worker assesses children at “very high” or “high” risk of abuse and/or neglect and the child is at risk for out of home placement in those families who will be or are receiving services. These meetings are scheduled to develop the plan and services to prevent the out of home placement and identifies the circumstances under which a removal might be considered. The team should convene within 30 days of initiating services and prior to the development of the ongoing service plan.

##### 2. Emergency Removal or At Risk of Out of Home Placement

This Family Partnership Meeting should be scheduled when the social worker assesses the child’s safety to be in jeopardy or at risk of removal or out of home placement. The meeting should be scheduled within 24 hours of safety issues being identified and occur before the 5 day court hearing in cases after the removal.

The participants in the Family Partnership Meeting should help to determine whether: (1) the agency should file for custody and facilitate placement, (2) the child can remain home safely with services, or the child return safely home with services, or (3) voluntary placement by parents with provision of services and safety plan, etc. Nevertheless, safety concerns are paramount and must be the first priority.

##### 3. Placement Preservation/Change of Placement/Disruption or Dissolution of Adoption

The Family Partnership Meeting should be requested before the child is moved from one placement to another. The meeting should be scheduled ideally when

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chronic or recurring problems in the placement are evident, but no later than when potential disruption of the foster or adoptive placement is recognized, safety issues exist, a move from the current placement is believed necessary to benefit the child, or when a child is beginning the transition to independent living, legal emancipation, aging out of foster care or adult foster care. This can be at the request of the child, birth parent, legal guardians, adoptive parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, or the agency. If the situation is urgent, the meeting should be scheduled within 48 hours of the request. If the meeting is to discuss considered change in placement, it should be scheduled within 5 business days.

4. Prior to Change of Goal

- Reunification: This meeting is scheduled when the risk level is reduced and parental progress and ability to protect and provide safety for the child is recognized. The team determines if the child can safely return to their own family, and a reunification meeting should be held before overnight visits begin. The team also outlines the process for visitation and the supports that the family will utilize in order to be successful.
- Placement with relatives: This meeting should be scheduled when the social worker determines that the plan for reunification has not been successful, efforts to revise the plan have been made and the team determines that the progress by parents has not been sufficient to reduce risk. At this meeting the need for a change in the goal for the child would be discussed. This meeting should be scheduled within 2 weeks of the request by any party for the meeting and before a change in goal occurs and before any court filing.
- Adoption by relatives or non-relatives: This meeting should be scheduled when the criteria in the above goals have been met and the social worker has explored possible options for placement with a relative. The meeting should be scheduled within 2 weeks of the request by any party for the meeting and before a change in goal occurs and before any court filing.
- Permanent Foster Care: This meeting should be scheduled when the criteria in the above goals have been met and the social worker has exhausted possible options for placement with a relative and adoption. The meeting should be scheduled within 2 weeks of the request by any party for the meeting and before a change in goal occurs and before any court filing.

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- Legal Emancipation or Aging Out of Foster Care/Independent Living: This meeting should be scheduled at least 12 months prior to emancipation and a plan for independent living is implemented. The Family Partnership Meeting should be used to identify the supports and permanent connections the youth will utilize to be successful. The need of the child to transition to adult services should also be explored and the adult services worker included in the meeting.
5. Requested Meeting  
Birth, foster and adoptive parents, legal guardians and the social worker can request a Family Partnership Meeting at any time if it is related to one of the other four decision points. These meetings should be scheduled within 2 weeks of the request, unless safety issues are present.

## **VI. DATA COLLECTION**

Information about the purpose, initiator, location, facilitator, attendees, and meeting outcomes related to the Family Partnership Meeting must be documented in OASIS.

## **VII. CSA**

Costs for facilitation are billable to CSA, provided that the facilitator is a trained individual that is not the case carrying social worker for the child or family.

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## APPENDIX

### I. BENEFITS OF USING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

**Virginia's Family Engagement process is based on the Team Decision Making Model developed by the Annie E. Casey Family to Family Initiative. While there are a variety of family engagement models, Virginia Department of Social Services will provide guidance, support, and technical assistance on the Family Partnership Meeting (FPM) which is based on TDM.**

It provides a well-rounded explanation of the benefits in using the family engagement model as it applies to children, youth, families, the community and the public child welfare agency.

**Family Partnership Meetings improve the decision making process by including a variety of professional staff, family, extended family, and community members in the decision making process; and it gives added support to individual caseworkers and supervisors.**

- Caseworkers concerned about a child's safety routinely have access to more experienced and knowledgeable fellow staff that can help them solve the problem.
- Families who are treated with respect can contribute more concretely to the identification of their family and children's needs. When families and extended families are part of the decision making process, they are more likely to participate in services to keep their family together or to complete tasks in order to have their children safely returned.
- Instead of being excluded from the process, the family, private service providers, and community representatives can participate in a discussion and partnership designed to keep the community's children safe.
- It improves internal agency cooperation, communication, and teamwork.
- It helps protect children by developing a specific safety plan for them.

**Family Partnership Meetings help the agency develop and sustain more consistent and accountable practices when placement is being considered, helping to assure that only those children who need to be placed are placed, and ensuring that reasonable efforts**

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**to prevent placement are made in every case.**

- It helps make the agency's decision making process more accountable to and understandable by families and the broader community. It helps to develop a specific, individualized intervention plan that has support from a broad-based group, not just the caseworker. It also insures that all relevant parties (family, extended family, agency workers, private providers, community, etc.) know and support the basic components of the plan.
- Reunification is safer, quicker, and more lasting if foster parents and supporters from the neighborhood have been involved in decision making throughout the life of the case.
- Permanence can more readily be achieved when families and their supporters join professionals in deciding what services and interventions would best meet the child's needs.
- Where foster care is indicated, placements are more stable if foster parents participate as team members.
- Family partnership helps to improve communications among individual service providers, who often speak only their own language. Services designed with the cooperation and input of families in terms that the family understands are more effective when offered to the family.
- It facilitates the development of long-term, community-based safety nets for families at risk by linking families with natural supports within their neighborhoods.
- It helps connect parents and families more efficiently and more quickly to accessible local service and supports, facilitating reunification efforts.

**Family Partnership Meetings can reframe the community's view of the public child welfare agency**

- The family engagement process can help redefine the child welfare agency's role as assisting communities and families to develop interventions to keep at-risk children safe and minimize the agency's perception as either child-snatchers or public employees who return children to dangerous and dysfunctional families.

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- Family engagement can thus clarify the child welfare system's role as neither unnecessary government intervention in children's and families' lives nor inept intervention that heedlessly returns children to troubled families likely to maltreat them again.
- Public child welfare agencies which use family engagement when placement is a consideration can educate the larger community about the legitimate role of child protection services.
- When the family, community agencies, and foster parents participate in decision making with child welfare workers, they learn more about the complexities of meeting children's needs. They learn first-hand that while children's safety remains the highest priority, children who are attached to their families are harmed by being separated from them.
- It makes a placement decision the responsibility of a larger group within the agency and the community at large. By regularly including the family, extended family, neighborhood advocates, community-based providers, and child welfare staff members in the most important decisions regarding the safety of the community's children, family engagement shares the agency's responsibility to keep children safe with parents, family, and the local community.
- By connecting families to natural supports within their own neighborhoods, family engagement often contributes to the development of long term community safety nets for families at risk. The process also nurtures growing partnerships between public child protection systems and the neighborhood-based entities that such systems have often overlooked in the past.
- For children whose need for safety requires separation from their families, the understandings and agreements that develop through family engagement often facilitate reunification.

**Family engagement increases consistency and competency across the continuum of child welfare services**

- It provides an opportunity for new or inexperienced caseworkers to learn from seasoned, skilled facilitators, as they model competent, family-friendly behavior

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and apply best practice approaches, legal principles, and agency policy to challenging situations.

- It provides a consistent foundation for practice that the family can expect regardless of how they enter the system.

## **II. SCHEDULING THE FAMILY PARTNERSHIP MEETING (FPM)**

The worker should identify time frames for each type of meeting to be scheduled from the time of request, keeping in mind the time sensitive nature of meetings after emergency placement and who will be notified once the social worker has talked with the family. There should be reserved meeting times for emergency Family Partnership Meetings available weekly. In an effort to have meetings that are convenient to the family, it should be considered if the meeting can be held in the family's community. The social worker should also contact the facilitator to discuss any special concerns and determine the plan for addressing them at the meeting. Special needs/security issues include but are not limited to domestic violence, need for language or deaf interpreter, large group size, etc.

The following information is needed to schedule a Family Partnership Meeting:

- basic demographics (names, family address, dates of birth),
- type of Family Partnership Meeting requested,
- when the meeting is needed, the location desired, and any special needs regarding safety, security, language interpretation, physical accommodations

## **III. PREPARATION OF THE FAMILY (parents and older youth)**

Preparation of the family is key to the success of the Family Partnership Meeting and to facilitating consensus at the meeting. It is essential that the social worker talk with the family before the meeting about the family engagement process and the expectations of the meeting. The social worker should explain the meeting purpose, goal and process, encourage parents and youth to identify who to include as support persons, answer any questions the family may have, address any concerns the family raises and explain the parameters for confidentiality. These efforts should be made even when the meeting is the result of a crisis or removal. The parent should be informed of the Family Partnership Meeting before removal occurs.

## **IV. ASSESSMENT TOOLS**

*The following tools can be helpful in assessing the needs of the child and/or the family:*

- SDM Safety Assessment

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- SDM Risk Assessment
- SDM Family Strengths and Needs Assessment
- Service Plan
- SDM Risk Reassessment
- SDM Reunification Assessment
- Ansell-Casey Life Skill Assessment
- Child Assessment of Needs and Strengths (CANS)

#### **V. FACILITATOR OPTIONS**

Family Partnership Meetings must be facilitated by a trained individual that is not the case carrying social worker for the child or family. The following is a list of options that may be used to facilitate meetings:

- Full-time agency facilitator, that does not carry a caseload
- Part time agency facilitator, with supervisory responsibilities or that carries a caseload. It may be beneficial to have a few social workers or supervisors within the agency trained to be facilitators. These individuals must not facilitate their own cases.
- Contracted position. Services for facilitation may be contracted with a private provider. This individual must be trained to facilitate family engagement meetings.
- Regional facilitator with locally pooled resources to share a staff person

In addition to a trained facilitator, localities will also need to be sure someone in the agency is available to assist with the coordination of Family Partnership Meetings including scheduling, inviting participants, and finding a location. As these meetings may need to occur with a quick turn around time, an individual that is able to handle issues timely is recommended.

#### **VI. STAGES OF A FPM MEETING**

1. Introduction
  - Purpose and goal
  - Consensus goal/agency owned
  - Introduction of participants, roles and relationship to child/family/case
  - Guidelines for meeting, including ground rules (privacy, all participants treated with respect, one person talks at a time, everyone has an opportunity to speak, time frame for meeting, special considerations if child is present, etc.)

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- Questions before beginning
- Circulate participant list for signatures

2. Identify the Situation

- Let the family tell the story if they feel comfortable and able to do so
- Define the concern
- Precipitating event/why are we here?

3. Assess the Situation

- Determine the magnitude of the situation
- Strengths/supports
- Risks
- Safety needs/concerns
- Services involved presently and utilized in the past
- Past history/stressors
- Participants' perception of situation
- Worker's recommendation

4. Develop ideas

Brainstorming ideas to address concerns and provide safety and protection. Ideas will usually be in four categories:

- Plan to provide safety
- Services to reduce risk and prevention of placement
- Placement/custody options and circumstances under which they may be needed
- Permanency Planning

5. Reach a Consensus/Decision

- Safety and protection in the least intrusive/least restrictive manner
- Action plan developed
- Timely linkage to services, priority services need immediate connection

NOTE: The goal is for the team to reach consensus during the decision-making process. However, the public child welfare agency maintains legal responsibility to make a decision if agreement by the full team cannot be achieved or if safety concerns persist. In pursuing consensus by the team, the facilitator will assist the group in moving toward consensus using this framework.

6. Recap/Closing

- Summarize the decisions made and who will do what and by when
- Thank the group

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- Call for any questions or concerns
- Set or review any scheduled meeting dates (Court, FAPT, IEP)

7. Follow Up

- Every effort to adhere to the decisions made during the FPM should be made
- If there are changes due to safety and/or legal concerns, the FPM participants need to be notified within three business days
- The social worker is responsible for talking with the family about the family engagement meeting and discuss their response to the process
- The social worker should communicate any of the family's concerns about the process to the FPM facilitator.

8. Review Process

Only participating agency staff can request review of a decision made during a family engagement meeting. There is a duty to request a review if there is a belief that a decision places a child at risk or violates the law or policy. Notification of intent to request review must be made immediately or at least a timely review meeting is scheduled with the agency director or their designee. All members of the family engagement meeting are invited to participate in the review process. The decision of the director or their designee becomes the official agency position.