



Engaging Virginia's Families

Family Engagement

Volume 1 Issue 5

May 2012

Introducing Alex Kamberis, Assistant Director for VDSS Family Services

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Interview, April 2012

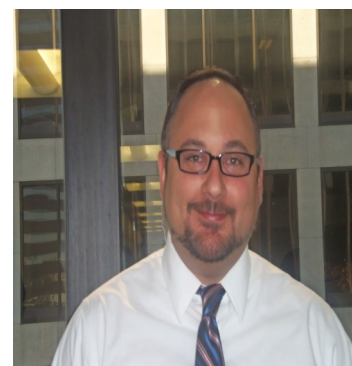
Question: As the new Assistant Director for the Division of Family Services, what would you like to share about yourself with the Family Engagement audience?

Answer: I recently moved to Richmond from Sarasota, Florida where I worked in child welfare for one of Florida's 22 child welfare agencies. I'm not originally from Florida but I lived there for the past 10 years. Prior to Florida, I worked in residential care and community mental health in Washington State. Though I was born in Alexandria, VA I left when I was 3 weeks old. I'm hoping that means I'm a Virginian! I am a State Department "brat" and grew up overseas until I came to the US for college. I received my undergraduate degree in psychology

and my graduate degree is in counseling with an emphasis in organizational psychology. I have been married 12 years to my wife Tamara and we have two sons who are five (George) and one (Charlie).

Question: What is your passion in child welfare?

Answer: To explain best, I must share a story. In my last job, I had the pleasure of meeting Israel, a 17 year old boy who had been in foster care for many years. Through tools available to all case managers (Accurint & old files) a determined employee was able to locate Israel's older brother who led us to aunts, uncles and eventually his birth mother who was dying of cancer in a nursing home. Watching their tearful reunion fundamentally changed my out-



Alex Kamberis, Assistant Director

look on family engagement. Israel had thought his older brother was dead and had seen no family in years. In the very first document of the very first volume of Israel's file was a list of relatives and contact information from the removal episode twelve years prior.

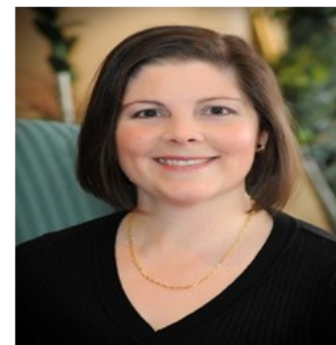
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Em Parente, Ph.D. New Leader of Family Engagement Programs

I am very excited about coming on board as the Family Engagement Program Manager. So much has already been accomplished in Virginia with the implementation of FPMs across many of the critical decision points in the "life" of child welfare cases. I know you all have worked hard and invested a lot in incorporating this family engagement tool into practice and I have heard from many

of you how successful you have been in using FPMs to improve outcomes for the children and families we serve. It is always exciting to be part of an effort which so many people are also excited about! I'd like to take this opportunity to share with you my goals for continued family engagement efforts.

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Em Parente, Ph.D.
Family Engagement Program Manager



Em Parente, Ph.D. New Leader of Family Engagement Programs

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First, Tracey and I are working on plans to provide additional support and training opportunities to both new and more seasoned FPM facilitators. Facilitators play a critical role in ensuring that each FPM incorporates the principles of family engagement and are in a unique position to model and encourage true partnering with youth, family and extended family members. We want to continue to support you and to develop strategies to facilitate your supporting each other, since it is interactions between facilitators and committed staff where we see real innovation and inspiration happening. We will have more information about these efforts coming out in the next month or so.

Additionally, to support the ongoing work being done around FPMs, funding has been made available to continue to provide incentive payments for FPMs which

meet the basic FPM model criteria. (See update on page 3.)

Finally, as you all know, family engagement is not a meeting model. It is a way of interacting with families that is respectful and collaborative, and builds connections rather than creating distance. FPMs are an important tool, because when done well, they facilitate true family engagement and contribute to the best possible decision making regarding children's lives. But FPMs are only one tool; there are many others. And family engagement needs to be happening in every contact with our clients, not just during FPMs. I am committed to growing and developing our skills for conducting FPMs; to expanding the use of FPMs into other areas of practice where their use will support family engagement

and good decision making; and to working towards moving family engagement values and behaviors into all aspects of our work from the first knock on the door, through celebrating the successful exit of the family from the system. Don't panic! I'm not saying we're going to do these things all at once. But I think it's good to have something worthwhile to work towards, and I wanted to share what I'm hoping we can work together to accomplish. Not only is family engagement not going to "go away," we are going to continue to grow and refine our family engagement practice until it is a fundamental part of how business is done very day! Why wouldn't we? What we're doing already is fabulous- and we can do so much more!



Family Engagement Updates on SPARK

The Family Engagement Program is updating their SPARK page. The VA Connects tool kit will be copied to SPARK so fam-

ily engagement resources can be found in one place. A new list of FAQs will also be posted. Please help us make this helpful.

If you have a question for the FAQ section please forward them to: tracey.jackson@dss.virginia.gov.

FPM Court Reporting Form

The results of both the 2009 and 2003 Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) found that Virginia was not adequately involving children and families in the case planning process. Virginia's Annual Report on the Five Year Child Welfare Plan submitted in June 2011 supported developing resources and

tools for service providers to more fully engage parents, youth and other significant individuals in planning, implementation and evaluation processes. To facilitate the process of informing the courts regarding Family Partnership Meetings and their outcomes a suggested format for a new form is posted on SPARK.

The form can be found using the following link:

http://spark.dss.virginia.gov/divisions/dfs/family_engagement/files/forms/032-14-0001-00-eng.pdf



**Virginia
Department of
Social Services
Mission:**

**People helping
people triumph
over poverty,
abuse, and
neglect to shape
strong futures
for themselves,
their families
and
communities.**



Meet Alex Kamberis, Assistant Director for VDSS Family Services

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Israel's story was the first of many success stories in finding family connections for kids largely deemed "unadoptable" who were adrift in the system. I have developed a strong passion for embracing policy and practice that helps connect children with their birth families.

Question: How do you see your role as it relates to family engagement in Virginia?

Answer: I see myself as a coach and advocate in the transformation of the Family Engagement philosophy into a practice. With so many competing priorities, it can be difficult for our front line workers to know the "flavor of the month". My goal is to have staff understand that Family Engagement is not an initiative that will go away. A good analogy would be weight loss. Recently, the focus of weight loss has been on lifestyle change rather than dieting. Family Engagement is not just another fad diet that Virginia will eventually fail. Rather, it is a prac-

tice change that should infuse every part of our jobs. Without exercise (training), we lose the progress that has been made over the past few years. Over the next year, I'd like to talk with front line staff to learn and share innovative approaches and highlight successes. I think timing is ripe for Family Engagement 2.0 and we need to hear from the field what is working and what barriers exist to fully embracing this approach.

Question: How will the Strengthening Family Initiative support family engagement practices in Virginia?

Answer: SFI is closely aligned with much of the work that is currently underway in the Division of Family Services and our local departments of social services – particularly is it relates to early prevention efforts and family engagement practices. Through SFI, there is an increased focus across Virginia's entire social services system on the engagement of fathers, the value of safe, stable, healthy relationships between parents, and the mean-

ingful involvement of both parents in the life of a child. Although great work is happening related to family engagement practices in Virginia, I think we can all agree that the engagement of fathers does not happen as often as it should along the child welfare continuum. With an increased focus on fathers, by conducting diligent searches and conducting Family Partnership Meetings, we can improve the ways in which we involve fathers in our system.

Question: Please share anything else you would like us to know.

Answer: I hope to impart a **sense of urgency** to state and local staff and volunteers regarding the need to connect family members to children in care. We have a humbling and awesome responsibility for these children. We must never forget the pivotal role we play in their lives and that our actions have consequences that last a lifetime.

FPM Incentives for 2012-2013

FPM Incentives will be continued for the State Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2013. The schedule of quarters is as follows: March –May, June-August, September-November and December-February. There will

be \$100, 000 available for disbursement for qualified FPMs each quarter. To assist agencies in monitoring FPM utilization and documentation, a new report has been made available in SafeMeasures.

Please check out the "Family Partnership Meetings in a Month" report. Your feedback is welcomed.

Family Engagement Learning Opportunities

Family Engagement Conference Registration Link

<http://vdssfamilylearningconference.eventbrite.com/>

FPM Facilitators' Roundtable Registration Link

<http://fpmfacilitatorsroundtable.eventbrite.com/>

A fatherhood engagement certification training for child welfare staff is being offered June 20 -22, 2012 in Richmond through a partnership with the Putative Father Registry. Seating is limited. Please contact Tracey Jackson for details and fees at tracey.jackson@dss.virginia.gov.

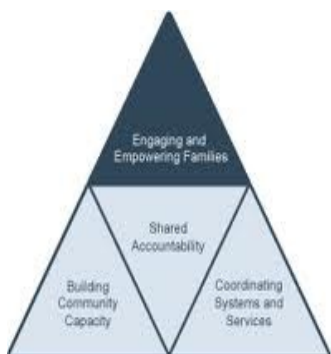
A two day Family Engagement Conference will be held on July 10 and 11 in the Richmond area. Details are forthcoming, but a limited number of conference registration scholarships are available. Please use the link to the left to register. On July 12, a one day Facilitators

Roundtable and training event will be held to conclude the Conference. Please use the link to the left to register separately for that event.

In 2011, the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) selected 30 individuals statewide to participate in the 2011 Family Engagement Project. The Project provided FPM facilitators with an opportunity to receive additional training and to network extensively with other facilitators. Training focused on enhancing facilitator skills and how to support successful implementation of a family engagement based practice. VDSS is

currently planning a 2nd Facilitator Project. In addition, a Master FPM Coaches Project for experienced facilitators is being developed. More information will be made available about these opportunities soon.

Finally, over the course of the fiscal year, training in the areas of Domestic Violence and FPM will be made available to frontline staff as well as facilitators in each region through a partnership with the Family Violence Unit of the Division of Community and Volunteer Services. We look forward to seeing you all at one or more of these events this year!



In order to receive the maximum allocation for FPM incentive funds you will need to avoid the three most common reasons funds are not awarded: 1) A family member is required to be present/participate during the meeting and identified in OASIS. 2) The facilitator must be an approved FPM Facilitator as evidenced by either completing CWS 4030 or other VDSS Family Engagement Unit approved training and 3) If additional verification is needed the Family Engagement Unit will contact the social services worker listed on the case primary by email. A response is needed within the timeframe requested.

FPM Incentive Tips

To improve our communication with you, in the future the agency director will be copied on any email sent to the social services worker to request additional information. The next review will be for December 2011, January 2012 and February 2012. Funds will be allocated in June 2012.

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Call for Presenters

This is to announce the Call for Presenters for a statewide 2012 Family Engagement Conference, "Strengthening Families Through Engagement in the Child Welfare System." The goal of the conference is to enhance service delivery and practices that will engage families affiliated with the child welfare system. The goal is to also encourage engagement of fathers and paternal rela-

tives in the child welfare system and provide training for child welfare workers and community partners to promote best practices in family engagement. The conference will be held July 10-11, 2012 in the Richmond, Virginia area.

Those interested in speaking or presenting a workshop at the conference should submit an abstract

abstract of the topic, method of presentation, and a biographical sketch for each presenter. The information is requested by **5:00 p.m. Friday, June 8, 2012. Please email information to tracey.jackson@dss.virginia.gov**



*Best Practice In
Action Highlights*

VIRGINIA SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEMS— BEST PRACTICE IN ACTION

Ten Steps to Successful Family Engagement Practices

(Adapted from Pathways to Meaningful Shared Leadership Publication)

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1. Make a significant commitment to sharing leadership. Parents and families need to feel their voices are heard.
2. Assess readiness. Identify agency and family strengths and build upon them. Identify areas for the agency and family to improve and seek helpful resources.
3. Think outside the box. Challenge assumptions and attitudes that are obstacles to engaging families.
4. Develop a plan to implement Family Partnership Meetings at all five decision points. The more opportunity families have to participate in Family Partnership Meetings the more opportunity there is for families to be empowered.
5. Provide concrete and emotional supports. Develop natural resources in your community to support the Family Engagement practice in the community.
6. Learn from others. Reach out to other agencies and find out what is working well for them as they implement Family Partnership Meetings or how they are using Family Partnership Meeting Incentive Funds.
7. Continually evaluate progress. See if your agency is increasing the number of Family Partnership Meetings or the number of family members attending the meetings.
8. Be a role model agency. Reach out and support the Family Partnership Meeting Facilitators in your agency and support Family Engagement in your region.
9. Solidify Family Engagement practices. Seek to strengthen families at every point of contact with your agency.
10. Celebrate success. It is always important to acknowledge successes along the way by recognizing achievements and hard work. Please share your successes by sending them to tracey.jackson@dss.virginia.gov so they can be placed in the newsletter.

