

Virginia Family Partnership Meeting Participant Survey:

Findings from the Local Agency Pilot Project, 2016-2017

(Executive Summary)

Between December 2015 and March 2017, the Virginia Department of Social Services piloted a paper-pencil survey (“Virginia Family Partnership Meeting Participant Survey”) given to adult family members and friends who attended Family Partnership Meetings (FPMs) pertaining to child welfare (e.g., CPS, foster care) cases. The study was conducted at 13 local social services agency sites across Virginia. In terms of agency size, six agencies were Level 3 (large), six were Level 2 (mid-size), and one was Level 1 (small). By region, the LDSS were distributed as follows: Central – 2, Eastern – 2, Northern – 2, Piedmont – 4, and Western – 3

The questionnaire contained items which assessed the extent to which each attending family member agreed that he or she: felt informed and prepared for the meeting, had supportive family and friends present, felt engaged in the discussion and had a role in the case plan, was satisfied with the choices made at the meeting, and was willing to attend future meetings. A total of 585 meeting participants completed the FPM Participant Survey, for a response rate of 40%. The typical respondent was female (70%), and either the biological mother or other maternal relative. Two-thirds of the sample had never previously attended a FPM. Half of the sample was non-White. The majority of respondents reported attending meetings related to CPS cases (70%) and which were led by female facilitators.

On average, the ratings were at or above 4.0¹, indicating high levels of agreement with positive statements, and thus positive perceptions, associated with the FPM. Comparing the statements, the one with the lowest mean rating was “I felt the family had the same or more say than professionals/experts at the meeting” (M=4.00). The statement with the highest mean rating was “I felt respected during the meeting” (M=4.43).

Key findings:

- Family participants’ impressions of the family partnership meetings were positive. Respondents were most likely to agree about knowing what the meeting was about, feeling respected, and being willing to attend future FPMs. Respondents were least likely to agree that family members had as much input as professionals at the meeting.
- Men had less favorable opinions than women about certain aspects of the meeting process. Men were less likely than women to believe that family members and friends had as much input as professionals. Also, men were less willing to attend future FPMs. The latter was particularly true for white biological fathers. In addition, white fathers were less likely than white mothers to feel respected and to believe that the case plan included ways in which family and friends could help.
- Race had an impact on perceptions of the FPMs. White participants had less favorable impressions of the family partnership meetings than black participants. This finding extended to comparisons between white and black biological parents.
- Case type (CPS vs. foster care) did not affect impressions of the FPM process. In one exception, participants who attended FPMs related to CPS cases were less willing to join in future meetings.

¹ The scale is from 1 to 5 with “5” representing “strongly agree” and “1” representing “strongly disagree.”

- Previous experience with FPMs correlated with more favorable impressions of the meetings. This was particularly true in regards to being informed and prepared for the meeting.
- Facilitator's gender did not affect impressions of the meeting.
- There may be advantages to starting the FPM earlier in the day. Participants who attended morning meetings generally had better impressions of the FPM process than participants who started the meetings in the afternoon.

The questionnaire is believed to be an effective tool for assessing participants' opinions of the FPM process. The results demonstrate the central importance of engagement as the foundation for building relationships with families, and suggest strategies that local social services agencies can implement to improve participants' impressions of the FPM, which may result in better compliance with the case plan, attendance at future meetings, and, ultimately, better outcomes for both families and children. Importantly, intentional efforts should be employed to foster inclusiveness at the meeting. The sample size allowed for comparisons among groups resulting in statistically significant findings which point us toward specific areas to improve engagement and expand supervisor and worker repertoire of skills. Like all fundamental casework skills, the core skill of *engaging* does not subscribe to a 'one size fits all' approach. Training solutions and coaching supervision, employing Practice Profile content, should focus on techniques to draw *all* family members and relatives into the process to offer them an authentic opportunity to have their voices heard and expertise on the child known.