



# Engaging Virginia's Families

Family Engagement

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## Betty Jo Zarris, Assistant Director for VDSS Family Services Retires but Leaves a Legacy— Her story and words

It is with mixed emotions that I extend my farewells to all the wonderful social services staff at all levels of the system. As of January 1 I am retiring as an employee within the system, but I will never stop caring about the issues we work on in child welfare and the caring people who continue to try to make Virginia's children and families safe and secure.

In my career of 40+ years I have seen a lot of initiatives in child welfare. Folks working in child welfare now can be proud of the Children's Services Transformation family engagement initiative begun in Virginia several years ago, because it is no longer an initiative but a recognized best practice. In many parts of the state these evidence based family engagement practices are becoming imbedded in how you work with children and families and community partners. This hard work on your part is making a difference in how children and families experience the system, about how they experience receiving help,

and how they feel about themselves.

Informing and engaging families are not easy activities and not always successful in achieving the desired outcomes, but it is worthwhile to make the effort. We at the Home Office have been privileged to hear some very gratifying stories from around the state about how children were able to avoid the trauma of foster care by being safely placed with family. We have also heard about youth finding permanent connections that make a difference in how they view themselves and their prospects.

One of the other really exciting things about the Transformation has been the growing ability to gather and use child welfare data. We all need to be able to get feedback on how we are doing, and with SafeMeasures the individual worker as well as the supervisor or director can easily see what is or is not



Betty Jo Zarris, Assistant Director

getting done. My hope is that this information is used as a motivator since all child welfare staff want the best outcomes for "their" children and families.

Make no mistake – it is noble and important work you do under difficult circumstances. Please keep that in mind when the days are long and disappointing. The successes are worth it, and you do have the ability to make a positive difference in a child's life. I am proud to have known so many of you and wish you continued success.



Happy New Year



Season's Greetings



## Welcome Mary "Em" Parente, New Program Manager

Saying goodbye can be so sad but welcoming a new member to the team is always good. The Division of Family Services is pleased to welcome Mary Parente who is called "Em," as the Family Placement and Engagement Man-

ager. Ms. Parente's duties will include continuing the Strengthening Families efforts in Virginia. Ms. Parente brings with her a wealth of knowledge and experience. In her current position Ms. Parente is the Social Work Supervisor for

Foster Care and Adoption with Charlottesville Department of Social Services. Ms. Parente will begin working in January 2012. Please congratulate and welcome Ms. Parente.

## Family Search and Engagement Training



Chauncey Strong, Sandy Bell and some attendees at a fall Family Search and Engagement training in Northern Virginia

Sandy Bell, Northern Resource Family Consultant and Chauncey Strong, Supervisor Fairfax DHS, provided training on family search and engagement in the fall of this year. The purpose of the training is to learn strategies to: identify and locate family members and significant adults; provide skills for engaging “family” and building relationships; review the youth’s need for connection to family; community of origin, and other significant adults; and to learn how these skills can be applied throughout the life of a case. Some children in foster care may not realize the importance of knowing their biological

family until they are much older. The training discusses the impact of children knowing family members including cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, the significance for children to have a place to go on special occasions, the significance of celebrations and rituals, and how all of this gives children a real sense of belonging to a family.

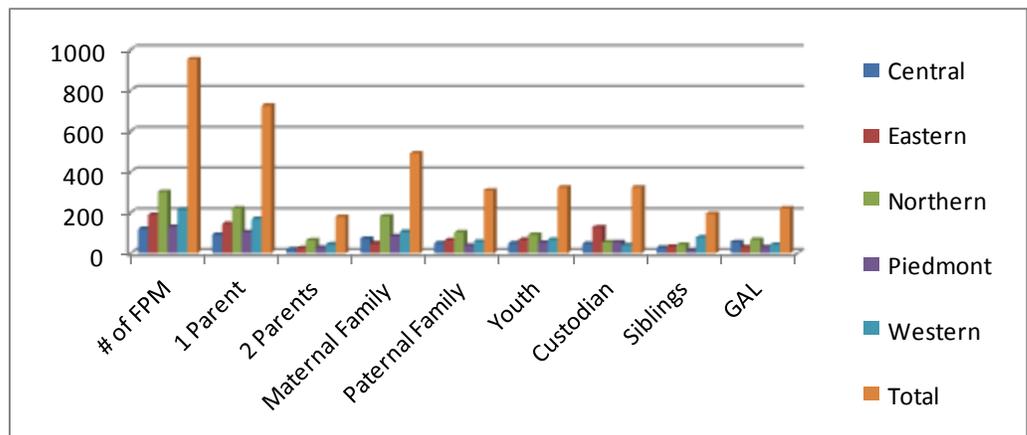
Family Search and Engagement training has made an impact throughout Virginia. A child protective services social worker commented her positive thoughts about the training and Virginia’s move to find and include

biological family members. She stated: *“We share a common thread of hope, passion, and joy through our “work”. I am thankful to know that I am not alone in my journey. I am grateful to know that many other people in different areas are being positively impacted by the “work” we do.”* Laura Binkowski, Winchester CPS Worker

Workers have a passion for this work and the Family Search and Engagement training fuels that passion. If you are interested in attending Family Search and Engagement training please contact your regional Resource Family Consultant.



## Regional Notes– FPM Report June – August 2011



## Family Partnership Incentive Funds

What could \$59,919 do for your agency as it relates to Family Partnership Meetings or family engagement activities? One local agency will have to answer that question while other agencies will have to determine how they will spend the funds that have been placed

in their budget line 854. If you are looking for some suggestions to spend the funds, here is what some local agencies have reported: paying the Family Partnership Meeting Facilitator, training regarding family engagement, salaries for staff related to family engagement, and equipment to

support Family Partnership Meetings. Other suggestions include: transportation to and from FPMs, child care provided during FPMs, search activities to locate and include family members in FPMs, and payments to coaches for internal facilitators.

**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.**

**Season's  
Greetings**



## It Takes A Community

The Family Engagement Regional Roundtable for the Eastern Region has been very productive. This fall Flora Harris, Resource Family Consultant for VDSS, was inspired to establish the Eastern Area Strengthening Family Committee which hosted its first Community Partners' Day event on September 8, 2011. The purpose of the event was to recognize the pivotal role and contributions of community partners in Family Engagement and community partners' valuable contribution to families and children. Activities included presentations by Sandra Bell, Northern Resource Family Consultant, Lyndell Lewis, Family Sta-

bilization Supervisor, and Rev. Clifford Barnett, CEO of Brighton Solid, Inc. Workshops included: Fatherhood, Creating Partnerships, Building Relationship and Recognizing Families' Values, and Culture and Strengths. Stephen Blythe, Eastern Area Regional Director was the Master of Ceremony for the event. Approximately 140 people participated in the event. The efforts of the community partners, staff and administration are greatly appreciated by the Eastern Area Strengthening Family Committee. Another Community Partners' Day is planned for September 6, 2012. For additional information please contact Flora Harris at

flora.harris@dss.virginia.gov.



COMM-  
UNITY  
DAY

*Celebrate  
OUR COMMUNITY*

## Important FPM Issues

While many localities seem to have worked out any issues about inviting attorneys to FPMs, others continue to struggle with questions related to roles and responsibilities of attorneys. Over the past couple of months we have been talking with local directors, regional consultants, and some attorneys to try to define the issues and seek solutions to the difficulties some localities are experiencing.

**The current guidance provided by the VDSS is that all attorneys should be notified, but unless it is someone the parents want in attendance, the meeting will not be planned around attorney schedules, but according to the family's needs.** If the GAL or parents' attorney cannot attend, they may want to advise their clients

ahead of time or plan to debrief with them after the meeting.

It is important that the attorneys understand this meeting is solution focused, and goal or services oriented. It is not about gathering information to use in court or rehashing history. Of course, information may be shared that would be relevant to court, and that is the fear of most attorneys. However, the FPM has been compared by some as being similar to, but certainly not the same as, the FAPT meetings, and attorneys often do not feel the need to attend those.

**Confidentiality, the collaborative spirit of the FPM process, parents attending without coun-**

**sel – these are issues that parents' counsel and GALs may be concerned about.**

Many people agree that an important piece of making these FPMs work is educating attorneys – especially parents' counsel – about what the FPM process tries to accomplish: family preservation and/or reunification – goals that should be consistent with their clients' interests. So, more education may be needed in order to avoid these FPMs from blowing up into mini-trials or being delayed or prohibited in some jurisdictions. Obviously, some of the issues listed also require more education and support of local departments, and VDSS is exploring options to meet those needs.

## Best Practice In Action Highlights

The number of valid FPM across the state increased from **782** from Quarter 3 ( March 2010– May 2011) to **953** for Quarter 4 (June 2011 to August 2011)

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### VIRGINIA SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEMS— BEST PRACTICE IN ACTION

See these recent comments from a number of individuals regarding involvement of attorneys in FPMS and let your Regional Consultants know if further guidance is needed:

- Chesterfield has had a generally positive experience – GAL and Parent attorneys are usually there and they “get it.”
- In addition to problems often occurring in scheduling, some localities still are not inviting attorneys. Local policies should be made known.
- In others, supervisor says the facilitator must invite all and try to accommodate their schedules.
- Letter from a New Kent attorney cites the dilemma of a GAL that attends but no other attorneys are present. VDSS’ view is the onus is on the GAL to contact other attorneys if the GAL needs permission to talk to parties at the meeting – still issue what to do when some show but not others.
- Some say we need clear guidelines about what is admissible in court from these meetings, but rules of evidence have not changed.
- Some suggest we need a letter from the local director to all community attorneys outlining the purpose of the meetings, etc.
- How can we best communicate that it is a social work process – looking at issues on a different level than court hearing?
- Confidentiality is unclear – many facilitators say all will be confidential, but not true if information identified will be used in planning – this is an issue for attorneys and families.
- Do people need examples of the meeting results that will be shared – focusing on what is needed, not a lot of past history?
- All agree a good facilitator is the key to keeping all focused on the solution or decision needed – some areas are still struggling to have someone impartial, experienced and skilled to facilitate meetings.
- One suggestion has been to offer jurisdictional cross training of attorneys and social workers – This would be slightly different than the sessions conducted for attorneys by Christie Marra and Eric Reynolds.
- VDSS is trying to support facilitators from other localities learning from each other – developing their skills through a peer network.
- VDSS is thinking of a late spring conference for facilitators – could/should this be expanded to include attorneys?
- There is a need to reinforce training of GALs as participants or supporters of FPMS – could we get information in a newsletter to them?
- Christie Marra is thinking about how to access parents’ attorneys with this type of information that will be targeted to GALs.

