

Orchestrating a Trauma-Informed Tone from the Beginning: Pre and Post Removal Conferences

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The Des Moines Experience: The Way We Were

Approximately 80% of “emergency” removals were occurring on Monday or Friday.

Parents who were consenting to removal, in the throes of chaos and upset, were presented with a document that gave only one option: waiving their right to a hearing within the statutory time frame.

Services typically did not begin until weeks later, at the pre-trial conference (if it were meaningful and not just a scheduling procedure) or adjudication.

The onus was on the unrepresented parent to contact the agency to set up services.

Barriers to Success: transportation, trauma triggers, polarization, lack of family contact, no early engagement, trust-building, less time to comply with ASFA deadlines,

Police action model: “Do no harm????”

Problem-Solving Journey

Stakeholders’ Conversation / Co-Creation

Attorney accessibility at agency

Pilot Project

Fully implemented in three months by popular demand

Reaping the Benefits

Prioritizes safety

Reduces trauma

Relative Resources - over half of placements with relatives within a year

Involves parents from the beginning of the process and gives them a voice in the plan for the child's time in foster care; allows them to be part of solution and to decide who will be some of the members of their support team

At first hearing many front-loaded services are already in place

Improved compliance with ICWA

Relationships with providers get off to the right start; promotes trust

Success breeds success

Eliminates barriers, e.g., transportation, interpretation, reading assistance

Engagement of fathers improved

Family contact begins immediately (each additional visit per week **triples** the odds of permanency occurring within a year)

Raises the bar for reasonable efforts

Problem-solving, strength-based approach

Expedites adjudication, permanency

Involving healthy extended family members buffers trauma

Improves compliance with ASFA (timely decision-making, concurrent planning) and Fostering Connections (maintaining siblings together, education stability, notification of adult relatives)

Sends the message that these cases are emergencies

Connects families to entitlements, e.g., Part C of IDEA, Caretaker FIP, WIC, without delay

Important appointments scheduled prior to first hearing

Exchange of contact information

Co-parenting from the beginning to support the child and parents

“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” Albert Einstein

Pre-removal Conferences: Our Approach to Minimizing Child Trauma and Increasing Family Engagement



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Summary: Authors explain the pre-removal conference, a successful collaborative effort implemented in Iowa. Parents and their support system attend a meeting to discuss a plan for removal, thereby reducing trauma to children and accelerating the permanency process.

Sometimes it is hard for a child welfare administrator to see how our work positively impacts families. More often we hear complaints from staff, community partners and clients. Judges generally focus time and energy on presiding over hearings, making decisions and writing rulings. We are often not at the table when planning extra-judicial case-related events that impact the delivery of timely justice. However, having been a National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Model Court site since 2000, our community was accustomed to convening stakeholders, rolling up our sleeves and implementing changes to improve practice. By working together, we were able to revolutionize the way child welfare cases generally begin.

Emergency removals occur when there is substantial evidence that the child's life or health is in imminent danger. We recognized that our existing removal protocol was neither family friendly nor strength based. "Knock and announce" tactics, as seen on TV during drug raids, were not uncommon. Removing children without notifying parents was another common practice. A panicked parent without a phone may or may not find the cryptic note scribbled on the back of an agency business card left in the door explaining her child's absence.

Surely there was a better way to ensure safety yet avoid adding to the trauma of the child's removal from home. In 2006, some key stakeholders asked what would happen if at the time of removal we sat down with a family to come up with a plan for removal of their children?

After meetings with staff, we devised the idea of pre-removal conferences (PRC). We would ask parents to bring their support system with them to discuss the removal of their children from their home, in a setting akin to a family team decision meeting. Our purpose was simple: to reduce trauma for children.

The meetings were to be strength based and child focused. These meetings were not negotiations regarding the need for removal because the need for removal had already been determined. The meetings centered on whether a relative could care for the children and, if so, what supports they needed. Family interactions, evaluations, transportation assistance and exchange of immunization records were arranged. Enlisting the parents in easing the transition honored their expertise in knowing what was best for their children.

Prior to our first PRC we did substantial crisis planning. We alerted law enforcement in case the family became violent. We came up with plans in case the family tried to flee with the children or failed to show up. In the end, our first meeting occurred with no problems. The parents thanked us and the professionals that participated were ready to do it again.

Agency staff experienced an immediate positive impact because of the strength-based process. They felt as if they were social workers, helping families during a time of need. Plus, by developing a plan with the family, they fielded fewer calls from upset family members after the removal. This saved the social workers valuable time. More often than not, children are placed with a relative, and the parents have had contact with their children prior to the

preliminary protective (removal) hearing (PPH). Most importantly, the trauma inherent in a removal is significantly reduced.

From the first test PRC it took only three months to implement the PRC process for all cases. Everyone saw the power in PRCs, and we never turned back. Since full implementation in the beginning of 2007, we have done hundreds of PRCs with consistently positive outcomes for families, agency staff and the courts. Even during times of high caseload and increasing demands, PRCs remain a priority.

PRCs have resulted in measurable improved outcomes in court proceedings. Many issues that used to take substantial docket time are no longer contested. Hearings are substantially shorter. Instead of hearing testimony that often tears down the parent, the court can build on the work done at the PRC to problem-solve and identify additional resources for the family.

The court can also clarify its expectations and impress a sense of urgency upon the parents, assuring them that the judge will order whatever services they need to support safe reunification, but on a time-limited basis so that the proceedings comply with state and federal deadlines and serve the child's need for safety, permanency and well-being. Active concurrent planning can begin.

Permanency is expedited because of timely and meaningful first hearings that support the front-loading of services. Delays are avoided at the PPH and later because of early appointment of counsel and conducting the pre-trial conference in conjunction with the PPH. The adjudication hearing is now routinely held within 30 days of removal, instead of 60.

PRCs are a testament to the power of families and their ability to sit down and reasonably solve problems. Given the right conditions and surrounded by people who believe in them, parents can make good decisions. Every parent loves their children and wants good things for them. As good partners with families, our agency was able to create a supportive environment that allows for the family voice to be heard and respected. As overseer of the case, the court ensures those voices continue to be heard and respected. The PRC process has become part of the child welfare fabric in our community.

Author biographies:

Mike McInroy, LMSW, has been employed with the Iowa Department of the Human Services since 1998. He is currently a social work administrator, overseeing child welfare services for 15 counties. Prior position with the Iowa Department of Human Services include social work case manager, child abuse assessment worker, service supervisor of case managers and community liaison. McInroy graduated in 1993 from the University of Northern Iowa with a bachelor's in criminology and in 2006 he graduated from the University of Iowa with his masters in social work.

Judge Constance Cohen was appointed to the Juvenile Court bench in the Fifth Judicial District of Iowa in 1994. Her jurisdiction includes dependency, delinquency, termination of parental rights, involuntary juvenile commitments, and adoption. Judge Cohen received bachelor's, master's and doctorate of jurisprudence degrees from Drake University. Prior to attending law school in 1984, she was a teacher and administrator.

Professional experience includes private practice, prosecution, prosecuting attorneys' training coordination for the Iowa Attorney General, and adjunct professor at Drake University Law School and Des Moines Area Community College. She is a former member of the board of trustees of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and continues to serve on the Permanency Planning Committee. Other professional activities include lead judge, Model Court Project, chair of the Juvenile Court Committee of the Iowa Judges Assn., lead faculty, 2005 Child

Abuse and Neglect Institute (NCJFCJ), member of the Court Improvement Project Oversight Committee, National Assn. of Women Judges, Polk County Women Attorneys and Iowa State Bar Association.

Judge Cohen is a frequent lecturer at local and national conferences, and has served as adjunct professor at Drake University Law School and Des Moines Area Community College.



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