

# Stakeholder Feedback Summary

Collected from sessions held October 2021-January 2022

# Contents

Background:.....	2
PIP-Related Strategy Feedback.....	2
Goal 1: Keep children safe at home with their families whenever possible .....	2
Child Safety Conferences.....	2
Response/Next Steps.....	2
Safe 4 Home/ 4 Questions, Safety Plans.....	2
Response/Next Steps.....	2
Family Preservation .....	3
Response/Next Steps.....	3
SBC Effectiveness.....	3
Response/Next Steps.....	3
Goal 2: Improve time to permanency and time to safe reunification.....	3
Engaging Fathers.....	3
Response/Next Steps.....	3
Quality Legal Representation.....	4
Response/Next Steps.....	4
Goal 3: Children experience optimal well-being because of increased focus on improving the parent’s capacity to provide for their children’s needs .....	4
Supervisor Professional Growth .....	4
Response/Next Steps.....	4
Infusion Sites .....	4
Response/Next Steps.....	4
Case Planning.....	5
Response/Next Steps.....	5
Additional Trends by Category.....	6
Overarching Barriers.....	7
What was the one thing your worker (DHS or FCS) did that you found to be most valuable? .....	8
What was the one thing your worker (DHS or FCS) did that you found to be least valuable? .....	9
One wish .....	9

# Iowa Stakeholder Feedback Summary

**Background:** Iowa held nine stakeholder feedback sessions between October and December 2021; in addition to these virtual meetings, stakeholders were invited to submit their feedback through email or participate in a phone survey during January 2022. The primary purpose for these meetings was to gather information regarding new initiatives prompted by Iowa's Child and Family Services Program Improvement Plan, to determine if they are making a difference. In addition to feedback on this focus, conversations with stakeholders identified trends currently impacting the child welfare system; while these issues were beyond the primary focus, the information is essential to understanding the current state and factors impacting performance and has been elevated for consideration in strategic planning.

Stakeholders were asked about the child welfare system, how it's functioning, gaps that exist, whether stakeholders have seen any changes over the last 1.5 years since PIP-related strategies have been implemented. Questions varied based on the stakeholder type, but all focused on key interaction points with the child welfare system.

Below is a high-level overview of the feedback received on key initiatives recently implemented; more specific data is available in associated documents. The PIP Oversight Team has reviewed this information; analysis, feedback, and next steps are included following each focus area. Some concerns were known prior to the stakeholder sessions and efforts were in place to address them; others may include referrals to identified groups for follow up plans.

If stakeholders have additional feedback to share please contact DHS by email at: [CFSR@dhs.state.ia.us](mailto:CFSR@dhs.state.ia.us)

## PIP-Related Strategy Feedback

### Goal 1: Keep children safe at home with their families whenever possible

#### Child Safety Conferences

There was consistent positive feedback across all groups. General feeling is this helps families, allows for creativity and problem-solving, and the short-term focus is more manageable rather than leaving the meeting with an overwhelming list of things a family must do; this is contributing toward keeping more children safely at home. As these often take place early in the case, Parent Partners, GALS, attorneys are often not included.

#### Response/Next Steps

Feedback indicates this strategy is implemented consistently and is widely considered to be promising. Additional monitoring mechanisms will be established to decrease manual entry of data to assure ongoing evaluation of progress. Follow up will also occur to determine if Parent Partner referrals are consistently being completed for families experiencing Child Safety Conferences.

#### Safe 4 Home/ 4 Questions, Safety Plans

Consistent feedback from Legal stakeholders and DHS that the 4 questions in conjunction with safety plans have led to fewer court-involved removals, although there is not currently an implementation or monitoring system in place that can provide direct data to support a causal effect. Stakeholders indicated they do not feel implementation is consistent across the state; identification of the degree of inconsistency is unknown due to the lack of a monitoring system as noted above. Several parents noted these types of questions were asked of them, though they were unfamiliar with the actual initiative behind that; parents mentioned CSCs, safety plans, general meetings, and many discussions but specific interventions were often unknown. Others indicated they were just now learning about options that could have been considered (i.e., such as someone moving into the home with them). Concerns were expressed related to due process rights when using safety plans in lieu of formal removals and impacts that may have on disposition and timely permanence.

#### Response/Next Steps

This initiative is seen as positive where it's been implemented, though stakeholders beyond Legal and DHS contributors were not familiar with the strategy when asked. Lack of a monitoring system and shared responsibility between DHS and the Courts for asking the 4 Questions creates multiple barriers for tracking the consistency of the practice: there is no objective way to determine the effectiveness of the strategy; if requests for removals are reduced due to DHS use; if requests are not granted by the Court due to bench use; or if there is any

impact related to this strategy. Strategies for monitoring the practice will be explored, but the PIP Oversight recognizes that tracking on this would probably be manual and would need to be weighed with available resources and priority.

Concerns regarding the use of safety plans and protecting a parent's right to due process were identified prior to the stakeholder sessions. Discussions between the Courts, Attorneys General, county attorneys, State Public Defenders and DHS are already underway to assure the practice of using safety plans is balanced with the rights of parents and the authority of the court.

### Family Preservation

There was consistent positive feedback regarding the opportunity to utilize these services during ongoing cases as well as during a child protective assessment. These services have more flexibility than previously contracted services and allow for intensified interventions to prevent removal; parents indicated the daily services have been beneficial.

### Response/Next Steps

Consistent positive feedback was received regarding this program and the increased flexibility in use of the service. We will continue to monitor and collect data regarding effectiveness.

### SBC Effectiveness

Concerns across groups regarding the effective implementation and fidelity to the model were common, though the issues differed across stakeholders. Some specific concerns include: the impact of workforce issues on the effectiveness of these services and related delay in permanency for families; implementation while concurrently training and understanding the concepts; the impact of contract limitations (i.e., the number of supervised visits) on Contractors, DHS, and families; communication; role delineation; compliance focus versus outcome focus. Overall, there was consistent feedback that the model provided more tools for contractors to use if the workforce is trained and stable.

### Response/Next Steps

In terms of evidence-based practices, SBC is in the early stages of implementation, as this usually takes 3-5 years. The impact of workforce turnover on this timeframe is unknown but expected to extend the full implementation process. Flexibilities have been added to job requirements for contractors to increase the pool of applicants, such as the degree required and who can supervise parent/child visits. DHS is developing a data dashboard regarding key elements of the SBC contract; this will allow contractors to monitor their own performance and promote communication between DHS and contractors to assure service expectations are implemented consistently. Iowa will also reach out to other states who have implemented SBC to discuss their experiences including what worked well and areas to focus on.

## Goal 2: Improve time to permanency and time to safe reunification

### Engaging Fathers

Overall, stakeholders are seeing improvement in the effort to engage fathers: discussions regarding father involvement are occurring and more ongoing attempts are being made to engage fathers; stakeholder feedback included specific situations of positive outcomes due to these increased efforts. While it appears focused questions regarding a father's involvement and location are being asked, active engagement remains a challenge. Stakeholders believe this area requires an ongoing focus to assure it remains a priority and continues to improve.

### Response/Next Steps

While feedback was positive overall, the PIP Oversight Team recognized the need to assure all service areas are consistent in implementation. Feedback regarding the differences between workers and the impact they have on a family's engagement and success is a larger issue and one that has worsened with current turnover rates. Data indicates placements with fathers and paternal relatives has shown an increase. The fathers who took part in the stakeholder sessions, as well as the majority of mothers, all were positive regarding being asked about fathers, paternal relatives, etc. and their involvement in the case. Many positive changes were observed regarding: the way DHS partners with families; the training that brings in the father's voice and experiences; and the work with

correctional partners regarding providing space conducive to visits. It was noted that currently there are very limited male Parent Partners; this may be enhanced through additional Family Treatment Court locations. Increasing this number may have an impact on father engagement.

Iowa will continue with existing implementation and monitoring plans, including ongoing consultation with supervisors and family team. Data will also be drilled down to the service area level, as well as statewide, to identify best practices and action steps implemented as needed.

### Quality Legal Representation

Stakeholders reported seeing some increased responsiveness from attorneys regarding getting back to parents, but communication continues to be the primary issue. Court hearings could be improved through inclusive involvement of all stakeholders, consistent communication regarding the schedule, and increased time spent between attorneys and clients – seeing parents or youth consistently more than just prior to the hearing. Legal stakeholder noted the Red Book training curriculum is improved from previous iterations, but additional stakeholder feedback was not available.

### Response/Next Steps

Youth and parents continue to report minimal interaction with GALs and attorneys prior to court hearings. Chapter 232 revisions could influence this area and DHS and CIP will collaborate to follow up on this strategy. Court system inconsistencies based on geographic location continue to make standard application across the state challenging. It's unclear if families are aware of what to expect from the child welfare/court system; CIP/DHS will discuss developing a guide or updating previously created documents defining roles and responsibilities of DHS and Juvenile Court that would be available to parents, teens, etc. This would lay out what families should expect from the GAL/ Attorney, DHS, etc., including both frequency and basic content of communication responsibilities. Red Book training and certification for attorneys are in the first year of implementation; training has been provided and now increased pay for certified attorneys is being explored. CIP will continue to work closely with attorneys to encourage their participation in both training and certification; CIP will continue to monitor the impact of these initiatives.

## Goal 3: Children experience optimal well-being because of increased focus on improving the parent's capacity to provide for their children's needs

### Supervisor Professional Growth

Consistently positive feedback on the Leadership Academy for Supervisors and the Essential Handbook for Supervisors regarding the content, structure, and applicability; noted these two training curricula complement each other well and enhance the learning experience.

### Response/Next Steps

The positive feedback on these training initiatives has resulted in continuation of both. A new cohort is currently enrolled in the Leadership Academy using the same curriculum as the first class with only minor changes made as identified during the course; the Essential Handbook curriculum is ongoing. Evaluation of the effectiveness of these will continue with adjustments being made as indicated.

### Infusion Sites

Legal stakeholders reported being aware of four additional sites that are just beginning to take referrals. Only anecdotal evidence is available at this point, but the concept of Family Treatment Courts has been validated in other areas.

### Response/Next Steps

The new sites are in early stages, so the lack of stakeholder feedback at this time is not surprising. Referrals are being accepted and increased engagement with the local communities and stakeholders is anticipated. Continue with current implementation plan.

## Case Planning

Parent stakeholders reported feeling much more involved in case planning than in the past, stating they feel heard when voicing their opinions. There is some confusion regarding the multiple plans for the family – case permanency plan, service plan, court orders and how these all fit together. Older youth however, consistently stated they do not feel involved during worker visits and YTDMs are not being used effectively to really drive the planning; once the YTDM is over, youth report they don't hear anything more about it. There were some concerns about Solution Focused Meetings (SFMs) as well, feeling that staffings are being relied on more frequently than SFMs due to the requirements involved in planning and holding an SFM.

## Response/Next Steps

The case permanency plan is undergoing significant revisions to be implemented with the new Child Welfare Information System (CWIS); this process includes surveying stakeholders to determine strategic changes that could simplify – both in language and in structure -- the information contained for more effective use by all. SFMs are a key strategy to engage with families and provide the structure for families to drive their case planning. SFMs rely on a balance between safety-focused non-negotiables and parent-identified priorities; these may be competing priorities and these meetings are intended to create a comprehensive plan forward. There has been communication between DHS and contractors to further refine implementation of the model; ongoing discussion in each service area regarding how to fully implement the model with integrity continues. The stakeholder feedback will be referred to the Social Work Administrators to explore primary concerns as they move forward with this collaboration. Similarly, YTDMs are a key strategy for older youth to plan for their future; the feedback from teens on YTDMs will be referred to Transition Specialists for exploration and follow up.

## Additional Trends by Category

### System

- \*Workforce/turnover issues; extremely high caseloads; more responsibilities to complete within the same amount of time; no overtime; lack of sufficient staff to service the cases.
- \*Staff Retention: limited opportunities for advancement; lack of incentives for higher education; high burnout; culture; pay/benefits have not kept up nor adequately compensate for stress, responsibility, hours, etc.
- \*Statewide inconsistency in practice, services, expectations
- \*Data dashboards available are not widely known or used
- \*Service availability is inconsistent -- urban vs rural; “access” versus “accessible”; transportation barriers
- \*Shelter services - children sit and wait for an appropriate placement to become available
- \*Need clear definition of role and responsibilities of DHS versus Contractors, assure quality services

### Mental Health Services

- \*Lack of MH and SA treatment -- lack of intense services to meet the need, holding families accountable for system issues
- \*Lack of crisis mental health services
- \*Teens not getting served via MCOs -- have to go into hospital and then request CINA
- \*Services for younger kids that are too young for placement -- judges/others wanting to put kids in QRTP when there is no PMIC available
- \*Youth with aggressive/assaultive behaviors in QRTP are placed in detention with no services due to eligibility for insurance

### Partnerships

- \*Regional differences in communication and partnering
- \*Communication between DHS and Schools is needed to assure all are aware when a child goes into formal placement as different expectations for schools become applicable
- \*Partnering is person-specific rather than role-specific or built into the system's structure
- \*No formal process for district teams anymore
- \*Providers often feel they have no voice, are not treated as professionals
- \*Frontline workers are feeling the stress of the changes to CW system; management within organizations seems to be more understanding/partnering
- \*Partnering requires an intentional effort to be effective
- \*Changes in practice (such as increased use of safety plans), lack of consistent communication makes it difficult for schools to know who is in placement; need to coordinate more
- \*Professionalism of the various partners is not always recognized and decisions of partners sometimes cross boundaries of expertise (Court/DHS)

### Services

- \*CSCs and Family Preservation are seen as very positive
- \*Unknown/inconsistent fidelity to the model
- \*Limitations within the contract regarding supervision of parent/child visits results in DHS workers having to take this on in addition to all other responsibilities and higher caseloads due to increased turnover
- \*Disconnect in perspective of effectiveness of services between DHS and Contractors
- \*Workforce/turnover has direct impact on services to families and progress toward goals

Conversations with stakeholders identified overarching trends currently impacting the child welfare system; while these issues were beyond the primary focus, the information is essential to understanding the current state and factors impacting performance and has been elevated for consideration in strategic planning.

<b>Overarching Barriers</b>					
<b>Staff turnover</b>	Training of contractors and DHS	Ability to meet service needs	Quality of services	Impact on family progress/ relationships with families	Financial cost of turnover
<b>Required activities for the family</b>	Families feel overwhelmed -- services, providers, meetings	Multiple "service" plans	Disconnect /misunderstanding of expectations among family, DHS, JCS, Courts	Logistics	
<b>Contract for Services</b>	Contract limitations result in DHS filling the gaps, stretched too thin, impacting turnover rates	Workforce / turnover issues throughout child welfare	Fidelity to the service model is a concern		
<b>Communication</b>	Lack of intentional efforts to ensure common foundation	Partnering across services is inconsistent, often dependent on people rather than structure or expectations	Families have difficulty getting in touch with workers		
<b>Inconsistent service/ expectations across the state -- DHS, Court, Contractors</b>	Quality is based on individual dynamics rather than systemic structure	Multiple "service" plans	Lack of communication		

## What was the one thing your worker (DHS or FCS) did that you found to be most valuable?

- Really good about answering our questions. First time met case worker we were asked about adoption. Planning for forever. Good about recognizing where we are and have as much information as possible.
- More seasoned workers have encouraged the bio parents to get in touch with FP -- encourage the teamwork rather than pitting foster parents against bio parents.
- Communicating, helping me financial-wise to get things for the kids
- Worker stayed longer when realized child was escalating –made sure family was safe.
- Understood goals, all on same page and working toward the same outcome
- Helped me mend the relationship with parents and be able to be in the same room with one another and come together to do what's best for the child.
- Being very blunt, up-front, and honest. Telling me this is where we're at in the process and this is what we're going to do about it.
- They would talk to me as a person with the same level of respect they would expect in return, not scolding or treating me like a child.
- When DHS appealed the case for him with TPR.
- Lots of resources! Having to keep track of all the appointment is difficult when having depression. FCS gave me a planner and helped me get organized. Have continued to find this very helpful.
- Placed son w/ my mom and then I was able to live there. Mom supervised all contact and I could see him more often.
- Pointing out the things that I HAVE accomplished and not dragging things out.
- I've found the most benefit in participating in Family Treatment Court.
- She advocated for me and made sure that I was getting the maximum number of hours for visits I could; she really believed in me
- Had a really great worker. Appreciated she would read information to me and took the time to explain things to me in way that I could understand.
- My last DHS worker really supported and trusted me. She truly had my back as long as I continued to do what I was doing.
- Approved two family members to supervise visits between me and my daughter daily Monday through Friday during COVID. I didn't have to rely on video visits. This was so important to me to keep the bond with my young kids.
- Our workers have been able to open doors and gain services for our daughter.
- Our workers have been a good lifeline for my husband and I. Our DHS and FCS workers are very experienced in their jobs and validate our needs and feelings regarding the challenges with our child.
- FCS showed up every day.
- DHS appealed the TPR case and got it reversed.
- My team WAS my support and cheerleaders
- GAL went to bat for me -- stood up in court and stated the child needed a different placement to meet his needs.
- Keep up to date on drug testing requirements. My new/current worker is on top of things, very understanding, I can call the DHS worker or the FCS worker when having a problem and they give suggestions on how to solve/handle.
- Really working with me in the beginning and helping with everything, giving me a chance to prove myself.
- New worker is younger, and closer to me in age and makes it easier to connect and have someone bubbly, punctual, and positive. Makes interactions personable.
- They were invested in my success, advocated for me, helped me and offered suggestions on how to communicate concerns or feelings about certain topics, like concerns with the progression of the case; they really listened.
- Would answer calls every time I called or message back right away

- Everyone pulled together, (GAL, attorney, FCS worker, Parent Partner, DHS worker) and was extremely supportive. We had weekly staffings to check in and make sure I was on track with appointments and services so it wouldn't come to TPR.
- Knowing and seeing the reports to the courts and seeing how the worker talked about all the progress being made and knowing those accomplishments are shared with the kids so they can see how hard I've been working.
- Being "seen" and recognized for what I'm doing right and for all the work to stay sober and repair the relationships.
- At FTM everyone had my back.

#### What was the one thing your worker (DHS or FCS) did that you found to be least valuable?

- Both parents were required to do the same services and drug testing, but communication focused on one parent rather than both
- Wrote off ICWA connection because adopted parent didn't have Native American ancestry; bio mom did but had not reported all information in most recent episode.
- I often feel left out on my options – respite versus foster parents taking child out of state for the holidays; not involved in decisions.
- Was told that statistically I (male parent) was going to fail.
- Have had 3 workers in last 2 years. Difficult to start over with each worker -- have to tell our story each time, develop relationship,
- My first worker was brand new and avoided conflict. He would tell me what I wanted to hear, "the goal is to reunify with you", while he told Dad that the goal was to terminate my rights, which is what Dad wanted to hear.
- Little contact with DHS worker; lots of change in workers.
- Worker would talk about termination in front of my daughter which scared her.
- So many expectations for services plus work full time
- Not getting an explanation or getting the opportunity to decide if a CINA was the best way to handle the situation; be upfront.

#### One wish

- Mutual professional respect
- All staff vacancies are filled and filled with people who want to do the work and stay
- Providers are paid for the time they are providing services
- Pay child welfare staff and supervisors equitably to validate them as first responders, demonstrate respect for the positions and the "worth" of the work completed
- Hire people in-house to do the things that SWCMs can't do, for example family interactions
- Increased funding for child welfare and juvenile justice programs – we have a stale budget
- Increase the pay to attract and keep trained professionals who can meet the needs of growing complex circumstances
- DHS-specific attorney for representation in juvenile court statewide – increase consistency and decrease duplicative training efforts
- Better relationship with our court partners
- Less micromanaging from the bench
- Foundational belief in child welfare system is that kids do better with family and recognizing families can change
- Fix the gaps between juvenile justice and mental health care systems
- Improved communication with community-based services and relationships with mental health and substance abuse treatment providers
- Equitable treatment options for girls, there are more options for boys in the state
- Let the social workers do the social work