

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Business Process: Reunification

I. POLICY

When a child must be separated from their family and placed into foster care, the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (“CFSA” or “Agency”) works with the birth parents or caregiver from whom the child was separated to resolve the safety concerns, so the child can return to their care. In keeping with federal guidelines, CFSA seeks to reunify families within 12 months of the separation. If reunification is not feasible, the agency will explore alternative permanency goals (see the [Permanency Practice policy](#) for more information on permanency goals).

This business process details the following aspects of reunification practice:

- Reunification Practice Overview and Guiding Values
- Parent Orientation and Early Engagement
- Settling the Child into the Resource Home and Community
- Visitation and Case Contacts
- Ongoing Case Planning and Review
- Progress Towards Reunification
- D.C. Family Court (“the Court”) Oversight

II. PROCEDURES

A. Reunification Practice Overview and Guiding Values

Reunification practice supports parents or caregivers in resolving the issues that necessitated the separation of their child from the home; while ensuring safety and stability for that child while in out-of-home care. To accomplish this, CFSA shall ensure that reunification practice is (1) based on effective engagement and teaming with the birth and resource families, and (2) guided by a case plan that is developed collaboratively by the social worker with the birth parents, other members of the clinical team, and members of the parents’ support networks, as appropriate.

Reunification practice shall also include:

1. Understanding by the clinical team the impact of trauma on children and families who have undergone a separation¹. A reflection of this understanding should be exhibited in all case planning, contacts and intervention

¹ The Child and Family Services (CFSA) chooses to use the term “separation” instead of “removal”, as it is more clinically appropriate.

2. Prioritizing placement with kin and maintaining family connections throughout the life of a case. Focusing on placement stability as an important strategy for reducing the child's time in foster care.
3. Promoting shared parenting between the birth parent and resource parent.

B. Parent Orientation and Early Engagement

Throughout the first 30 days following a child's separation from their home, the social worker and other CFSA staff shall work together to familiarize the family with the agency, the child's placement, and the steps needed for reunification to occur. The Agency shall conduct birth parent engagement (which shall include both parents) and kin exploration including both maternal and paternal resources. Efforts and interventions include, but are not limited to, the following activities:

1. Parent Engagement, Education and Resource (PEER) Support Unit one-on-one meetings [hereinafter 1:1]. (See the definition section of the [Permanency Practice policy](#) for a description of the PEER Support Unit.)
 - a. **Purpose.** Parents meet individually with a PEER Unit staff member to (1) become familiar with CFSA, (2) learn what to expect with the process, (3) obtain answers to their immediate questions, and (4) receive a comprehensive orientation manual (See *Attachment A - Information and Resource Guide for Birth Parents Following the Removal of a Child*).
 - b. **Process and Timing.** Within the first week following separation, PEER unit staff shall seek to schedule an in-person meeting with the birth parent(s). Following the orientation, most parents may continue receiving ongoing PEER engagement and support for up to nine (9) months.
 - c. **Documentation.** The PEER unit staff member conducting the 1:1 shall complete a summary in the contact notes sections in FACES.net. The date of the orientation is entered into the permanency tracker by the Permanency Administration data team.

Note: CFSA's contracted providers do not house "PEER Units;" however, they utilize similar parent-partner specialists or other designated staff to provide such services.

2. Removal Family Team Meeting (FTM)
 - a. **Purpose.** During the Removal FTM, birth parents, immediate and extended family or kin, the CFSA clinical team (social worker, supervisor, PEER, and other staff), attorneys for the agency and parent, the guardian *ad litem* (GAL), and other involved professionals convene to: (1) review the reasons for separation; (2) discuss concurrent planning for alternative permanency goals and the associated timelines; and (3) begin to outline the case plan and needed services. Resource parents may be included in an FTM) depending on the comfort level of the family. (See *Attachment B: Practice Tip Sheet- Resource Parents, FTMs and Family Engagement: Everything You Need to Know!*). In some instances, resource parents may be asked to provide information before the meeting. (See the [FTM policy](#) for more information.)
 - b. **Process and Timing.** FTM coordinators have primary responsibility for managing the logistics of the FTMs, including identifying and sending invitations to all appropriate participants. The FTM Unit shall coordinate the Removal FTM, and hold it within 72 hours of separation, and prior to the initial court hearing unless extenuating circumstances prevent this from occurring. The FTM facilitator shall guide the meeting participants towards the development of a strategic plan for ensuring the child's safety, well-being, and permanency. All FTM participants are encouraged to participate in the development of the plan by considering all pertinent facts related to the assessment and needs of the child,

birth parents, and resource providers. Decisions made during the FTM shall supersede any other decisions made prior to the FTM.

- c. **Documentation.** At the conclusion of the FTM (or by noon the following day), a plan shall be distributed to all participants by the FTM facilitator or designee. The social worker shall file a hard copy in the case record. The FTM Unit enters the date of the Removal FTM (and any subsequent FTMs) into their database and the Permanency Tracker. (See the [FTM policy](#) for more information.)

3. Icebreaker and Shared Parenting

- a. **Purpose.** Shared parenting between birth and resource parents supports the child's well-being and placement stability, which may increase the likelihood of reunification. An initial "icebreaker" between birth parents and resource parents allows for information about the child to be shared, and an early communication plan to be developed. Icebreakers also provide an opportunity for birth parents and resource parents to develop a supportive connection to one another. Following the icebreaker, shared parenting looks different for every family (see the [Shared Parenting Tip Sheets](#)).

- b. **Process and timing.** As soon as possible after separation, the Kinship Unit coordinates a facilitated "Icebreaker" meeting between the resource and birth parents. In addition, the social worker can request an icebreaker at any time.

Note: In some instances, an initial icebreaker may not occur due to a lack of willingness by the parties.

- c. **Documentation.** A communication agreement developed during the icebreaker is distributed by PEER unit staff at the end of the meeting to both the birth parents and resource parents. The Icebreaker facilitator documents the meeting in the contact notes section of FACES.net. The facilitator shall follow up with the social worker to communicate the details about the meeting, including any observed interactions between the birth parents and resource parents.

Note: CFSA's contracted providers may have different procedures for conducting icebreakers and establishing shared parenting. The overall goals of enhancing the relationship and building effective communication between the birth parents and resource are the same.

4. Meetings with the Social Worker

- a. **Purpose.** The ongoing social worker shall visit and communicate frequently with the birth parents in the first month following separation to (1) begin building an effective working relationship; (2) identify and engage with all identified kin (both for immediate support and concurrent planning; and (3) complete a series of required tasks including:
 - i. Securing an affidavit of paternity with the assistance of the parent's attorney
 - ii. Obtaining information and signatures for key documents, including releases
 - iii. Conducting the Caregiver Strengths and Barriers Assessment (CSBA) to help inform case planning
 - iv. Providing connection to initial service referrals
 - v. Completing the initial case plan (see the [Case Planning business process](#) for more information).
- b. **Process and Timeframes.** The tasks in the first four bullet points above (4[a][i-iv]) above are conducted by the social worker with the birth parent on a regular basis. The initial case plan as noted in the fifth bullet point above (task v) is developed in a team environment, led by the social worker, with the active participation of both parents, all age-appropriate children, kin, resource parents, legal representatives, service providers, and

any other relevant individuals that work closely with the family. The initial case plan shall be completed and signed by the parents within 30 days of separation. (See the [Case Planning](#) business process for more information).

- c. **Documentation.** All case contact notes shall be entered by the social worker in FACES.net within 72 hours of the contact's occurrence (*note: timeframes may vary for contracted providers*). The case plan shall be filed with the Court within 60 days of the separation. The due date for the initial case plan is listed in the initial hearing order.

C. Settling the Child into the Resource Home and Community

During a child's first several weeks in foster care, a series of steps are taken to support their health and well-being, reduce trauma, and provide as smooth a transition as possible. The social worker, birth parent, and resource parent shall collaborate on effective transition strategies, taking into consideration the strengths-based relationships and routines the child has established in the birth parent or caregiver's home. Additional steps include, but are not limited to, the following activities:

1. Life Arrangements

- a. **Purpose.** To ease adjustment in to foster care, the CPS social worker shall seek to ensure that children have their essential personal items as well as a comforting item (such as a favorite toy or photo) that they can bring to the resource home. As needed, the Agency shall secure additional needed personal items for the child. The social worker shall also work with CFSA's Office of Well-Being's (OWB's) Education and Child Care Unit to reduce disruptions to the child's education.
- b. **Process and timing.** In the first 24-72 hours, after the child's separation from the home, the CPS social worker may also request that the child's birth parents or caregivers bring additional personal items for the child to the Removal FTM and/or to Court. The assigned social worker shall seek to ensure that transportation for the child to attend school has been arranged prior to the placement. If a child is changing schools, the social worker shall obtain the records for transfer, with the help of an OWB educational specialist. (See the [Education Services policy](#) for more information regarding transportation and determining the school of origin.)
- c. **Documentation.** All information should be documented in FACES.net.

2. Health and Mental Health Screenings

- a. **Purpose.** Initial health and mental health screenings shall be conducted on all children entering foster care to ensure the Agency and receiving resource parents are fully aware of the child's health status, and to identify any concerns that may require ongoing attention as part of the child's service plan. Additional comprehensive physical and mental health evaluations shall be conducted within 30 days of the child entering care to gather further detail about the child. (See [the Initial Evaluation of Children's Health policy](#) for more information.)
- b. **Process and Timing.** Prior to placement, the assigned social worker shall ensure that children receive an initial health and mental health screening at the CFSA Healthy Horizons Assessment Center (HHAC). However, if a child is entering care following a discharge from a hospital and had a recent screening, an additional screening at HHAC is not required. The social worker shall document screenings in the contact notes section in FACES.net.

The assigned social worker shall also ensure that a comprehensive physical evaluation, a mental health evaluation, and a dental evaluation are completed by an appropriate provider. All relevant information is shared by the social worker with the resource parent. Full medical and dental evaluations are completed within 30 days of placement. Recently

completed (within 6 months of entering care) dental exams shall suffice if documentation is available. (See [the Initial Evaluation of Children's Health policy](#) for more information.)

- c. **Documentation.** HHAC staff shall document all relevant information in FACES.net in the health tab. For evaluations conducted externally, the social worker shall gather the documentation and include the information in the child or family's file.

3. Mental Health Evaluation

- a. **Purpose.** To ensure the mental health needs of children entering care are identified and met expeditiously, upon entry into care, the child shall receive a mental health evaluation by a CFSA Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner at the HHAC, unless the child has an existing relationship with a mental health provider. Children, five years old and older, who are assessed to need therapy and do not have an existing provider will be assigned to a CFSA mental health clinician. (See the Initial Evaluation of Children's Health policy for more information). See the [Initial Evaluation of Children's Health policy](#) for more information.
- b. **Process and Timing.** To the extent practicable, children shall be scheduled for a mental health evaluation to coincide with their scheduled comprehensive exam. The exam and the evaluation shall be completed within 10-14 days of separation. The Office of Well-Being (OWB) mental health team shall send the mental health treatment recommendation form and case assignment (if applicable) to the social work team, and any needed follow-up is scheduled by either OWB or the social work team. The social worker shares all appropriate information with resource parents and service providers.
- c. **Documentation.** Assigned members of the mental health team enter assessment information and session notes FACES.net.

4. Developmental Assessment

- a. **Purpose.** Using the Child & Adolescent or Pre-School Functional Assessment Scales (CAFAS or PECFAS), a complete assessment of the child's functioning across multiple domains shall be conducted. The results of the assessment shall inform and guide the goals and action steps articulated in the case and service plans for the child and family.
- b. **Process and Timing.** Within 30 days of separation, the social worker who completes the CAFAS (for children over age 6) or PECFAS (for children under age 6) shall enter the results in FACES.net. The assessments are then updated by the social worker every 90 days.
- c. **Documentation.** The social worker shall enter the results of the CAFAS/PECFAS in FACES.net.

5. Child's Placement Passport Packet

- a. **Purpose.** The Placement Passport Packet provides comprehensive information about the child. (See the [Placement and Matching policy](#) for more information on contents of Placement Passport Packet.) The packet is provided to the child's caretakers to ensure they have as much information as possible to properly support the child.
- b. **Process and Timing.**
 - i. The CPS or In-Home Division shall develop the first part of the Placement Passport – an introductory folder – for all new entries.
 - ii. The Resource Parent Support Worker (RPSW) and the on-going social worker shall collaborate to gather the additional material that is included in the Placement Passport.

- iii. The social worker shall ensure the Placement Passport Packet is completed with as much information as available. The packet shall be provided to the resource family within five (5) business days of the placement.
- iv. Monthly review and updates to the Placement Passport Packet material is the collective responsibility of the resource parent support worker, the resource parent, with the support of the assigned social worker, as needed.
- v. The assigned social worker shall ensure that the Placement Passport Packet travels with the child to each home.

6. Resource Parent Support

- a. **Purpose.** To support placement stability, CFSA assigns each resource parent a dedicated support worker (RPSW) who serves as a source of information, guidance, and support. CFSA also offers crisis intervention services, peer-to-peer support, and targeted training available to its resource parents. CFSA's contracted providers have specialists and coaches who provide similar support to resource parents.
- b. **Process and Timing.**
 - i. Within two (2) business days of a placement, the RPSW shall make initial contact with the resource parent and provide them with an overview of their role and resources.
 - ii. The RPSW shall conduct an initial home visit within five (5) business days of the child's placement. If possible, the visit should be conducted jointly with the social worker to increase collaboration and increase stabilization of the resource home. The RPSW shall reach out to the social worker regarding a joint visit.
 - iii. After the initial visit, the RPSW shall make subsequent monthly home visits as a "check in" to assess placement stability and the parents' fostering experience. The RPSW shall ensure the resource parent has all necessary information for accessing crisis and peer-to-peer supports as well as training.
- c. **Documentation.** RPSWs shall document their interactions with resource parents in FACES.net in the provider contact screen.

D. Visitation and Case Contacts

Social worker contacts with children in care and with birth and resource parents, as well as visitation between family members, comprise the backbone of reunification practice. These activities are used strategically to build trust, assess safety and risk, identify strengths and address barriers to move cases to reunification or another permanency result.

All case events shall be documented in FACES.net using the "PCAP" format to capture the Purpose, Content, Assessment, and Plan (see [PCAP guidance](#) for more information). Documentation in FACES.net shall include critical information, which reflects new and/or updated observations of the child and birth parents from each visit, including (but not limited to): whether the birth parents arrived and left on time; or whether they missed the visit and if so, the reason (noting any pattern of absences); whether there are changes in behavior or appearance; any concerning behaviors or statements. Notes shall also capture whether a discussion was held with parents regarding items in the case plan, documenting statements made by the parents. Finally, notes shall include the statements and observed behaviors of the child on the way to the visit as well as their reactions afterwards. Documentation shall not consist of a duplication of notes from previous visits.

CFSA's minimum requirements for both visits and case contacts are as follows:

1. Family Visitation Requirements

- a. **Parent/caregiver-to-Child Visits.** Children in foster care shall visit with parent(s) or caregiver(s) within the first week of separation. The visits shall subsequently occur at least weekly, unless the Family Court determines it is not in the child's best interest. Individual case considerations and the assessment of the clinical team will guide the establishment of visit parameters. They may take place at CFSA or, when appropriate, in the birth parent's home, or anywhere in the community. The team shall strive for the least restrictive environment possible.
- b. **Sibling Visits.** The social worker shall facilitate visitation when siblings are placed apart. Siblings who are placed apart shall have contact with each other within 48 hours of placement. When feasible, siblings shall visit with each other twice monthly. (*See the [Visitation policy](#) for more information*). If siblings are placed separately across CFSA and contracted agency's providers, the social worker assigned to the youngest child shall have "family responsibility," meaning the social worker is responsible for coordinating visitation between siblings, completing and updating the family case plan, and leading the case. (*See the [Case Planning business process](#) for more information.*)

2. Child Visitation Requirements

- a. **Social Worker-to-Child Visits, First Four Weeks.** A child shall have four (4) visits with their ongoing social worker in the first four (4) weeks of a new placement. At least two (2) of the visits shall be conducted by the social worker; the other two (2) may be conducted by a family support worker (FSW) or nurse care manager (NCM). One (1) of the visits shall be in the resource home and include a conversation with the resource parent.
- b. **Social Worker-to-Child Visits, On-Going.** After the first four weeks in care, a child shall have twice monthly contact with the social worker. One (1) contact shall be in the resource home; one (1) shall be conducted by the social worker and the other may be conducted by an FSW or NCM.
- c. **Social Worker Visits with Siblings of Children in Care.** Siblings of children in foster care who reside in the birth parent's home shall receive one (1) visit per month, by any staff member at any location.

Note: During every visit with a child, the social worker shall assess and document the safety and risk of the child(ren) in the home as well as meet with the child outside the presence of the caregiver.

3. Worker-to-Parent Visitation Requirements. Both parents of children in care who have a goal of reunification shall visit with agency staff twice monthly in the first three (3) months following separation. One (1) of these visits shall be completed by the social worker. From the fourth month through either reunification or goal change, the social worker shall meet with both parents once per month.

E. Ongoing Case Planning and Review

The case plan is the primary tool through which the social worker and the family work together. It drives the mobilization of community supports, resources, and interventions that help a family resolve the reasons a child enters into care. A case plan also helps to support the child's well-being and maintain their stable functioning while in foster care (or out-of-home care). The social worker leads the clinical team that undertakes case planning, coordination, and decision-making for the case. All case plans shall align with the components detailed in court orders and court reports (*See Attachment C: Court Reports: How to Make the Most out of This Critical Document*). When the goal is reunification, a case plan is required to be prepared for both the mother and the

father, even if a parent's whereabouts are unknown or they are incarcerated. (See the [Case Planning business process](#) for more information.)

1. Updating the Case Plan

- a. **Purpose.** As families work through the issues that resulted in the separation of a child, their case and service agreements are likely to evolve due to additional interventions identified by the clinical team. The case plan shall be updated on a regular basis, in close collaboration with the family, to reflect all progress and changes.
- b. **Process and Timing.** The service agreement is updated in FACES.net by the social worker every 90 days and the Case Plan is updated in FACES.net every six months. Updating requires signatures of parents, children (as applicable), and the supervisory social worker. Signed copies are held in the case file, filed with the Court, and distributed by the social worker to the parent and guardian ad litem (GAL).

2. Concurrent Planning

- a. **Purpose.** Minimizing a child's time in out-of-home care depends on identifying concurrent (or alternative) permanency plans from the beginning. As a case moves forward, a range of permanency resources for the child shall be continually assessed and actively engaged throughout the life of the case. Until the first Permanency Hearing on the case (by 12 months, described below), CFSA maintains primary and secondary permanency goals for the child to guide practice with the family. Although the Court may order a sole goal of reunification at the first Permanency Hearing, the social worker shall continue to engage and explore kin and resource parents as permanency options to expedite adoption or guardianship, in the event reunification does not occur.
- b. **Process and timing.** During the PEER 1:1 orientation and Removal FTM, the concept of concurrent permanency planning is reinforced with the family. In addition, the social worker routinely discusses alternative kin permanency options during case planning. Diligent search and other mechanisms are used by the social worker to locate kin if none are actively participating in planning (see the [Diligent Search policy](#) for more information). During monthly resource home visits, social workers shall discuss with the resource parents progress towards the permanency goal, which include support in the identification of kin and the resource parents' potential interest in becoming the permanency resource for the child if reunification does not occur.
- c. **Documentation.** Efforts to identify kin and plan concurrently with a family is documented in FACES.net contact notes by the Kinship Unit (at the onset of the case), and then by the ongoing social worker. Information documented includes, but is not limited to: contacts made via a diligent search; instances when parents identify kin; efforts made to contact and explore the identified kin; and the reasons why children were not placed with identified kin.

3. Using Supervision to Troubleshoot Case Barriers

- a. **Purpose.** Social workers may face case-specific or structural barriers as they work to support timely permanence for children and families. Supervision is the primary resource for social workers to explore such concerns when they face challenges, receive clinical support, and direction to help them keep children and families on the path to achieving their case goals.
- b. **Process and timing.** Supervisory social workers (SSWs) shall be available daily to their staff and provide formal supervision weekly. All cases are discussed monthly at minimum. SSWs meet weekly with their program manager (PM) to further troubleshoot barriers and develop solutions. All cases with a goal of reunification are also discussed in a multi-disciplinary Permanency Goal Review Meeting (PGRM) at the 9, 12, and 15 month

intervals from separation to assess progress and identify critical next steps (See the [Permanency Practice policy](#) for more information on PGRM).

- c. **Documentation.** PGRM notes and next steps shall be documented in the Permanency Tracker by the meeting scribe(s).

F. Progress Towards Reunification

As birth parents resolve the issues that resulted in the separation of their children, CFSA shall take a series of steps to move them towards reunification and eventual case closure.

1. Visitation Progression

- a. **Purpose.** The beginning of unsupervised visitation is a critical progress point on the path to reunification. As soon as safely possible, families should be transitioned to unsupervised visitation, followed by overnight visits, and then longer homestays so that parents can practice and demonstrate their improved parenting habits and skills (see the [Visitation policy](#)).
- b. **Process and timing.** Social workers, in collaboration with both the birth parent and resource parent, are responsible for developing a monthly visitation plan. They shall review visit objectives with the birth parents before and after each visit and discuss visit-related issues and concerns. They shall also communicate regularly with the resource parent about all visit-related issues and concerns. The visitation progression is generally as follows:
 - i. Weekly supervised visits (for a minimum 1 hour, at CFSA, in the home, or community)
 - ii. Periodic, then weekly, unsupervised visits (2-3 hours, at CFSA, in the home, or community)
 - iii. Single overnight visit (24-36 hours, in the birth parent's home)
 - iv. Weekend or extended visit (2-3 nights or longer, in the birth parent's home)

Note: *As a child is transitioning to more time in the birth home, (in preparation for the protective supervision period [described below]), the social worker, birth parent, and resource parent shall collaborate on effective transition strategies, taking into consideration the relationships and routines the child has established in the resource home. The social worker and RPSW shall work with the resource parent on processing issues of grief. Input from other professionals involved in the case, including the GAL, counselors or therapists, shall also be taken into consideration for transition planning.*

- c. **Documentation.** As visitation progresses, the social worker shall ensure the case plan is updated accordingly. Visit summaries shall be documented in FACES.net using the PCAP format. The updates to the case plan must be in writing, communicated to all parties, and filed with the Court.

2. Protective Supervision

- a. **Purpose.** Protective supervision is a court-ordered provisional return of the child to the home from which they were removed with ongoing CFSA and court involvement. This period of 90 days is used to finalize and monitor sustainability plans developed by the clinical team. It also ensures services and resources needed to support post-closure family stability are in place. (See the Standards for [Safe Case Closure policy](#) for more information.)

b. **Process and timing.**

- i. Prior to the court hearing where the agency recommends a child's return home, the ongoing social worker shall lead the family in the development of the sustainability plan. In a court report, the agency provides justification for this recommendation while identifying the appropriate next steps. The elements of the plan are listed in the court report.

***Note:** The terms for releasing a child back to their parents under protective supervision status as recommended by the Agency should be identical to the parental goals identified in the sustainability plan.*

- ii. The Agency shall petition the court for a period of court monitored protective supervision not to exceed 90 days.
- iii. During this 90-day period, the social worker shall visit the family at least twice monthly to assess the caregiver and children to determine if there are any safety or risk issues that require resolution. The social worker shall also assess the birth parents' compliance with the conditions of protective supervision.

- c. **Documentation.** If protective supervision is granted by the court, the social worker shall change the child's status in FACES.net. Although the child's status has changed, the social worker maintains case responsibility and the child is considered reunified/no longer in foster care. All subsequent visits are documented in FACES.net using the PCAP format.

3. Case Closure

- a. **Purpose.** Following a successful period of protective supervision, during which any safety or risk issues have been resolved, the Agency and family court simultaneously close the case (See the [Standards for Safe Case Closure policy](#) for more information).
- b. **Process and documentation.** Prior to the closure of the family's case, the social worker shall document in the case record in FACES.net that the family has substantially achieved all of its case plan goals.

G. Moving Towards Goal Change

If the parents or caregivers from whom a child was separated are not engaging with the agency, regularly visiting their child, and actively working to resolve the issues that resulted in the separation, CFSA shall pursue alternative permanency goals, such as adoption or guardianship, through the following series of steps.

1. Well-Executed and Documented Case Practice

- a. **Purpose.** In order to make a successful goal change recommendation, CFSA shall prove to the court that it has made sufficient efforts to engage the family in case planning, support them in their efforts to resolve their challenges, and engage extended family in these efforts. As these efforts are underway, regular, candid discussions about concurrent planning and permanency timelines provide the foundation for a possible shift to an alternative permanency goal.
- b. **Process and timing.** Beginning at separation and continuing at every case contact, the social worker shall have candid discussions with the birth parents and other family members, as needed, about the birth parent's goals and their progress. If progress is not being made, the social worker must identify and discuss the needed intervention.
- c. **Documentation.** The above work begins at separated and continues at every case contact. It is documented in contact notes in FACES.net and also in updates to the case plan which shall be in writing, shared with all parties, and filed with the court.

2. Recommending a Goal Change to the Court

- a. **Purpose.** The Agency makes a recommendation to the Court about a goal change. The decision to change the goal is made by the judge on the case. The Agency must meet the requirements set forth in the law. The judge will make a legal determination based on the Agency's clinical assessment and any evidence presented by the birth parents and anyone else involved in the case.
- b. **Process and timing.** A goal change recommendation can be made either in a court report or by the OAG filing a *praecipe*, which is a request for an evidentiary hearing. The ongoing social worker and AAG, working in close collaboration, shall determine the appropriate timing and strategy. CFSA shall seek to make this recommendation between nine and eleven months from separation, with the objective of having the Ta.L. evidentiary hearing held in conjunction with the 12-month permanency hearing, or as soon as possible thereafter.
- c. **Documentation.** All casework leading to a goal change recommendation shall be documented in the FACES.net contact notes and court reports. The SSW shall document the date of the recommended goal change in the Permanency Tracker. If there is a compelling reason not to move forward with the goal change, this shall also be documented in the case plan.

3. Ta.L. Evidentiary Hearing

- a. **Purpose.** In a December 2016 case ("In re Ta.L."), the D.C. Court of Appeals held that parents have the right to an evidentiary hearing before the court changes the goal of a case from reunification to adoption. At the Ta.L. hearing, the Judge shall make a finding, by a preponderance of the evidence, on four (4) criteria:
 - i. CFSA has provided both parents with a reasonable plan for achieving reunification;
 - ii. CFSA has expended reasonable efforts to help both parents ameliorate the conditions of which brought the family to the Agency's attention;
 - iii. Both parents have failed to make adequate progress toward satisfying the requirements of the plan; and
 - iv. Other vehicles for preventing termination of parental rights were explored (e.g., CFSA made efforts to involve kin in its work with the family).
- b. **Process and timing.** CFSA strives to complete the Ta.L. process and secure a goal change as close to 12 months from separation as possible when the child's birth parents have been unsuccessful in pursuing or achieving the goals identified in their case plan. The Agency's effort to enable sufficient time for the assigned, ongoing social worker to complete the process steps required to achieve alternative goals such as adoption or guardianship (*see the Adoption and Guardianship business processes for more information*). Under the guidance of the assigned Assistant Attorney General (AAG), the social worker is the primary individual to make the case for a goal change during the evidentiary hearing. Possible results of the evidentiary hearing are:
 - i. If the court finds in favor of the Agency, the child's permanency goal is changed either at the time of the hearing or in written findings issued shortly thereafter.
 - ii. If the court finds that the government did not carry its burden on any one of the factors outlined above, the goal remains reunification, at least until the next permanency hearing. The Agency shall continue to work with the family to achieve that goal.

- iii. If an appeal is filed by a birth parent against the court's decision in the evidentiary hearing, the social worker shall continue following the practices identified in Agency policy and business processes for achieving the new goal, until a decision on the appeal is finalized. In addition, the social worker shall continue to assist both parents in their efforts to reunify.
- c. **Documentation.** The social worker's documented efforts in all four areas above serve as the evidence to necessary assist the Court with determining whether to grant the goal change. This information shall be contained in concise contact notes in FACES.net, visitation logs, and court reports. The SSW shall document the beginning and end dates of the Ta.L. hearing and its outcome in the Permanency Tracker.

H. Court Oversight

The Family Court is the final authority and decision-maker on all matters related to the safety, well-being, and permanency of children in foster care. The Court exercises its oversight through a series of hearings, detailed below. CFSA shall be represented by the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) in all child abuse and neglect court matters. Social workers shall seek assistance from the OAG when case-specific legal issues arise.

The social worker and clinical team work closely with the assigned Assistant Attorney General (AAG) to ensure that cases are progressing towards permanency in line with court timeframes and orders and to prepare for all interactions with the court.

The social worker is responsible for working with the child's assigned Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) whose job is to represent the best interests of the child. The GAL has investigative authority and responsibility, meaning an obligation to independently assess case progress (e.g., by talking to the school or resource parent) and make recommendations to the court. The social worker is also responsible for working with the Parents' Attorney(s). The social worker must consult with the AAG before communicating with the parents' attorney.

The standard progression of hearings and other court events on a case is as follows: (See *Attachment D: Court Hearings During the Life of a Case*).

1. Initial Hearing

- a. **Purpose.** The initial hearing is the first court hearing after an abuse/neglect complaint has been filed by the OAG. It is used to:
 - i. File the neglect petition
 - ii. Request that the child be placed in "shelter care" (foster care), if needed.
 - iii. Allow for parents or the GAL to challenge the request, resulting in a probable cause hearing.
 - iv. Discuss scheduling of mediation, the pre-trial hearing, and the trial.
 - v. Address any necessary orders (e.g., visitation, services, drug testing, evaluations).
- b. **Timing.** For an emergency separation, the initial hearing is held within 72 hours of the separation. Otherwise, it shall be held within five (5) days of the petition being filed.
- c. **Social worker roles and responsibilities:**
 - i. CPS and the assigned ongoing social workers shall attend, participate and can be called as a witness in an initial hearing/probable cause hearing.
 - ii. The social worker is not required to complete a court report in advance of an initial hearing. The AAG and/or GAL may contact the social worker before the hearing to obtain information. In addition, at the Removal R.E.D. (Review, Evaluate, and Direct) Team Meeting, the social worker shall discuss recommendations to the Court and any services for the children and family, including visitation plans.

- iii. Social workers shall inform resource parents that they are not invited to the initial hearing due to the confidential nature of the proceedings.

2. Mediation

- a. **Purpose.** Mediation is not a court hearing; it is a convening of parties to discuss the case and to allow the OAG to negotiate a stipulation (whereby, the parents acknowledge that the child is neglected). If the parents stipulate, parties go before the judge to schedule the disposition hearing. If they do not stipulate, the next scheduled hearing shall be the pretrial hearing, used to discuss the trial.
- b. **Timing.** Mediation is held within 30 days of the initial hearing.
- c. **Social worker roles and responsibilities:**
 - i. Attend the mediation and take the opportunity to talk with the parent about the case plan and secure the birth parent's signatures for documentation.
 - ii. Submit a mediation report (the Removal FTM report may be used for this purpose, if available) upon SSW approval, two days ahead of the mediation. The report goes to all parties.

3. Pre-Trial Hearing

- a. **Purpose.** A pre-trial hearing occurs if parents do not make a stipulation at mediation and if the case is proceeding to trial. Pre-trial statements filed by all attorneys on the case are reviewed. The judge may ask for an update on the child.
- b. **Timing.** The date for the pre-trial hearing is set at the initial hearing.
- c. **Social worker roles and responsibilities:**
 - i. Attend the hearing to report on the child, if required by the Judge or AAG.
 - ii. A report is not required.

4. Neglect Trial

- a. **Purpose.** If there is no stipulation by the parents, the case shall go to trial to determine whether the child is neglected.
- b. **Timing.** The trial shall occur within 45 days of the initial hearing if the child is at home ("conditional release") or within 105 days of separation if the child is in foster care ("shelter care").
- c. **Social worker roles and responsibilities**
 - i. The social worker shall submit the "Disposition Report" (described below), approved by the SSW, five (5) days before the neglect trial.
 - ii. The AAG shall notify the social worker after an unsuccessful mediation whether they will be a witness for trial.

5. Disposition Hearing

- a. **Purpose.** The Disposition Hearing is the first opportunity for the social worker to present a comprehensive report on: the issues that brought the family to the court's attention; the Agency's plan to support the family in addressing the identified issues; and efforts, thus far, by the Agency and family.
- b. **Timing.** The Disposition Hearing shall take place after a stipulation or trial. If the case stipulates, disposition is set when the parties are before the judge, who sets a due date for the report. If the case proceeds to trial, the disposition report is due to the court five (5) days before the trial.

c. **Social worker roles and responsibilities**

- i. Appear at the hearing with a recommended permanency goal and concurrent goals. (*See Attachment E: Testifying in Court*)
- ii. Be prepared to discuss the case plan for both parents and what is needed to achieve its goals.
- iii. Prepare and submit the report following SSW approval.

6. Review of Disposition Hearing

- a. **Purpose.** The Review of Disposition Hearing is a check-in on the family's progress in meeting the case plan's goals. There may be more than one Review of Disposition hearing before the first permanency hearing.
- b. **Timing.** The Disposition Review Hearing usually occurs approximately two or three months after the initial Disposition Hearing. The Review of Disposition Report, approved by the SSW, is due to the court 10 business days before the hearing
- c. **Social worker roles and responsibilities.** The social worker shall be responsible for the following activities:
 - i. Prepare and be present to discuss the report, which summarizes the case plan and clearly details the agency's efforts to support the family in achieving the permanency goal and the parents' compliance or progress with the case plan.
 - ii. If there are concerns about the viability of reunification, the social worker shall indicate whether all kin have been identified and explored, and if adoption has been discussed with the current caretaker.
 - iii. Resource parents can attend any review hearing or permanency hearing. If there is disagreement between resource parents and the birth parent or team members about the resource parent's attendance, the social worker shall facilitate a conversation with these individuals to resolve the dispute.

7. Permanency Hearings

- a. **Purpose.** Once a child has been in care for 12 months, permanency hearings become the primary vehicle for keeping the court informed about the family's progress, and for seeking needed rulings on the case, such as the establishment of a single permanency goal.
- b. **Timing.** The initial permanency hearing shall occur within 12 months of a child's entry into foster care. The date is set at the Disposition Hearing. Subsequent Permanency Hearings generally take place at least every six months.
- c. **Social worker roles and responsibilities.** The social worker shall be responsible for the following activities:
 - i. Working with the AAG and clinical team to develop a strong permanency goal recommendation and on any needed testimony or presentation of information.
 - ii. Preparing and submitting a comprehensive report (with supervisory social worker's approval) within 10 business days prior to the hearing.
 - iii. Preparing to discuss any court report that summarizes the case plan and clearly details the agency's efforts to support the family in achieving the permanency goal and the birth parents' compliance or progress with the case plan.
 - iv. If there are concerns about the viability of reunification, the social worker shall indicate whether kin have been identified and explored, and if adoption has been discussed with the current caretaker

8. Meeting In re Ta.L. Requirements

- a. **Purpose.** If, at any point in the life of a case, the agency wishes to recommend a permanency goal other than reunification, it will provide the following documentation to the court during a In re Ta.L. evidentiary hearing:
 - i. Evidence that the agency developed a reasonable plan to achieve reunification that ameliorates the issues that led to separation (i.e., a completed case plan) including documentation that the plan was communicated and provided to the child's birth parents;
 - ii. Evidence of the agency's reasonable efforts to assist the birth parents with achieving completion of the plan;
 - iii. Evidence that demonstrates if the birth parents failed to make adequate progress to complete the plan; and
 - iv. Evidence that the agency adequately explored kin.

To meet the requirements above, there shall be activity, efforts, and documentation in all four areas above from the time a child comes into care. *(See Procedure H(3) below for more information on Ta.L Hearings.)*

- b. **Process, timing and documentation.** The ongoing social worker is responsible for leading and documenting in the case record all efforts needed to meet the Ta.L. requirements. *(See the Adoption Business Process for more information on Ta.L.)*

9. Status/Interim Reports

- a. **Purpose.** Status/Interim Reports are completed by the social worker when (1) ordered by the Court and/or (2) there is a significant event that impacts the case, such as: a change of social worker; a change in placement; allegations or evidence of abuse or neglect; other issues that impact the child's safety and well-being, such as a psychiatric hospitalization or arrest.
- b. **Timing.** Status/Interim Reports are submitted to the Court by the social worker, following the supervisory social worker's approval. If a status hearing has been called, the social worker shall complete and submit the report 10 days in advance. If there is no status hearing, the report should be submitted as soon as possible following the identified event.



Practice Tips

Resource Parents, FTMs and Family Engagement: Everything You Need to Know!

Resource Parents are central to CFSA's mission of achieving permanency for children and families. They are the primary support for children in foster care, responsible for their daily well-being and also for helping them manage trauma and find stable footing. As a result, Resource Parents' insights are invaluable to the team. This Tip Sheet explores Resource Parent roles in Family Team Meetings and other engagement efforts.

What is an FTM?

One important part of CFSA's work with families whose children are in foster care is the FTM, or "Family Team Meeting:" a family-driven, facilitated gathering of a child's immediate and extended family, service providers (from in and outside of CFSA), and others involved. FTMs support CFSA's intensive efforts to help birth families resolve the issues that brought their children into care.

There are three types of FTM:

- **An initial FTM (called a "Removal FTM")**, held shortly after a separation, helps orient the family to foster care practices and expectations, and launches the work towards reunification.
- **Additional FTMs (called "Permanency FTMs")** may be held on cases that are at a crossroads regarding permanency. They are used to develop new strategies, consider how to secure a forever family, and make sure all efforts and options are being exhausted. While CFSA has had specific timeframes for Permanency FTMs in the past, currently they are held as needed.
- **FTMs for older youth (called "LYFE meetings")** support those 16 years or older by reviewing challenges to permanency, establishing plans for their future, and helping them build lifelong adult connections.

Who Plans the FTM?

FTMs are coordinated and facilitated by CFSA's FTM Unit. Removal FTM referrals are assigned automatically following a child's placement into foster care. After that, anyone on the team can request a Permanency FTM or LYFE meeting. If a Resource Parent feels that an FTM is needed, they should follow up with the child or youth's assigned Social Worker who will make a referral to the FTM Unit.

In all cases, the FTM Unit's Coordinator works with the professional team, and extensively with the birth family and/or other supports, to plan for the FTM. Securing the birth family's comfort (especially regarding privacy) is a top priority in FTM planning, which is why ***all invitations to participate are managed by the FTM Coordinator.***

What is a Resource Parent's Role in the FTM?

One key goal of an FTM — especially those held immediately following a family separation — is to reassure the birth family that a child is safe and well-cared for. While Resource Parents are certainly the team members best able to describe the child's adjustment, CFSA knows that there are also natural tensions and challenges in play:

- Birth parents who have been separated from their children are working to process severe loss, anger, fear and guilt – in addition to enormous amounts of information. Many are embarking on “action plans” that will push them beyond their life experiences and comfort zones.
- Resource parents are responsible for helping a child who is experiencing significant loss and trauma to adjust to a new home, family, school and community. The demands on their time are many, and the emotional work can be very difficult.

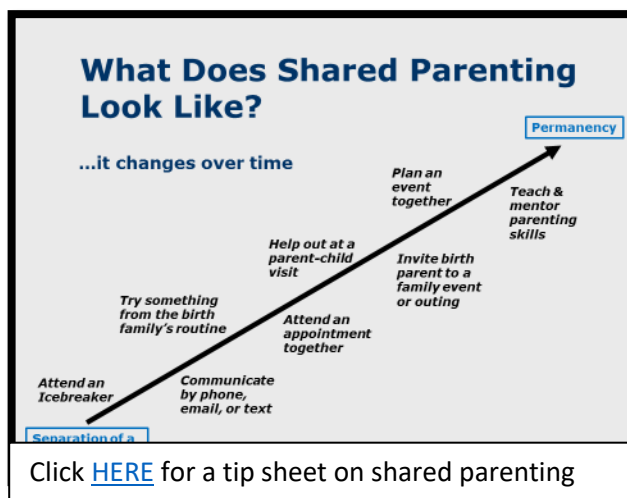
Understanding these dynamics, and with priority for FTMs being given to the birth family's privacy and comfort, Resource Parent participation in an FTM may be limited. Our experience is that it is generally most effective to have Resource Parents on the phone for a short period of time, to update on the child. However, after assessing the landscape and relationships, the clinical team and the birth family may decide that additional Resource Parent participation will help support the FTM. If so, that would be arranged. If Resource Parents aren't available to participate in the FTM, the Coordinator can get an update on the child and report it to the team.

Shared Parenting and Icebreakers

Another, more comprehensive way for birth and resource parents to interact is through the practice of “Shared Parenting.” This on-going, active, supportive relationship between the two sets of parents decreases loss and trauma for a child, increases placement stability and helps speed up permanency.

Shared parenting is not a single activity or tool – it's a mindset. Many CFSA staff and resource parents have been doing this for a long time. For others, it's new. Usually, the Social Worker is responsible for putting shared parenting into action by:

- Encouraging communication
- Helping to resolve differences
- Suggesting and facilitating mutual activities



One of the first steps toward Shared Parenting is usually an “Icebreaker” meeting between birth parents and resource parents, if both parties are willing and able. The Kinship Licensing Unit coordinates icebreakers shortly after a child is placed. If the need for one arises later in the case, a referral can be made. For more information, or to discuss scheduling an icebreaker, talk with your Social Worker, or email CFSA.kinfirst@dc.gov.



Practice Tips

Court Reports

How to Make the Most of this Critical Case Document

The Power of Your Court Report

- It is the first thing the judge will read before the hearing.
- Your words and writing style will influence what the reader thinks about the activity you describe, such as whether it was undertaken effectively or properly.
- It is an important opportunity to show your clinical expertise and build your professional reputation.
- It will help guide the court in determining a child's legal status, placement and services.

Before You Start: Research

- Review the most recent court order to make sure all orders were followed and all court-ordered services are in place. If they aren't, be prepared to lay out the reasons why not, and the plan for implementing them.
- For all services in place, be sure to detail when and where they are being provided and include a statement that the agency has provided all relevant background information to service providers (i.e., copies of court-ordered evaluations, relevant social summaries, and the agency's recommendations about what issues facing the family must be addressed by the service).
- Review your contact notes to refresh your memory of the case particulars.
- Gather all of your information on the case in one place and contact service providers to get the most recent progress reports.

10 Steps for Building a Strong Report

1. Include all the required, relevant and factual information on the case — don't leave anything out.
2. Use evidence and specific language — descriptions and concrete examples — to support any statements you make (such as "mother and child are bonded") or recommendations you offer (such as "father should attend substance abuse treatment") or reporting on case issues (such as "the child's sexualized behaviors include provocative dancing and inappropriately touching classmates on top of their clothes").

3. Be sure to state the current permanency goal and the goal that is being recommended.
4. Include what each parent must specifically do to achieve each case goal – don't identify problems in the case without laying out the plans to resolve them.
5. Uses language that is free of judgment and opinion, and don't blame — such as indicating that a provider has delayed implementation of a service.
6. Include the dates for all appointments and meetings, including medical and dental. Make sure all visit dates are included and accurate. Since these automatically populate to the court report, be sure to update the visit log.
7. Include in the "Compliance with Services" section any special efforts (such as referrals for a Thanksgiving basket or clothing vouchers) and include the family's response and compliance.
8. NEVER report information about HIV/AIDS or STDs/Pregnancy unless the client consents in writing.
9. Don't cut and paste information word-for-word from one section into another.
10. Use clear, concise, professional language and make sure the report is free of spelling and grammatical errors.

Important Attachments

Be sure to include:

- Evaluations (psychological, educational)
- Treatment summaries from therapists
- Individual education plans (IEPs)
- Grades and school attendance reports
- Tutoring reports
- FTM and YTP reports
- Drug testing results

Writing Tips to Keep in Mind

- Refer to yourself in the 3rd person "Social Worker met with..."
- Refer to team members by their name *and* title or role: "Resource Parent," "Therapist," "Family Support Worker."
- "Don't" use contractions, like "don't." Say "do not" instead.
- Spell out all numbers up to ten.
- Only use an acronym after you have spelled it out (this including CFSA and any other agency acronyms)
- Don't use clinical terms (such as "dysregulated") without explanation – most judges and attorneys don't have a background in social work.
- Don't use "compliant" or "non-compliant." Be specific instead: "Ms. Jones attended 5 out of 6 sessions."



Practice Tips

Court Hearings During the Life of a Case A Refresher!

Initial Hearing

- The first court hearing after a complaint has been filed. For an emergency separation, the initial hearing is within 72 hours of the separation. In a community papering case, the date is set when the AAG informs the court about the need for community papering, but must be within 5 days of the filing of the complaint.
- The purpose of the initial hearing is to file the petition, request placement (either in home or in foster care), discuss scheduling of the mediation, pre-trial hearing, and trial), address any needed orders (e.g., visitation, services, drug testing, evaluations), and obtain the requisite legal findings, required by law, when a neglect matter is initiated. If separation/shelter care is being requested, the initial hearing also gives the parents an opportunity to challenge whether there is probable cause to believe that the allegations in the petition are true, by having the Government present testimony regarding the allegations.
- No court report is required.
- Both the worker involved in bringing the case to court (usually CPS if it was a separation) and the ongoing worker (Permanency or Community Partnerships) should attend.

Mediation

- Mediation is not a court hearing and is set within 30 days of the initial hearing.
- The FTM report is used for this process, unless an FTM has not occurred, in which case the assigned social worker will be required to submit a mediation report.
- There are two purposes: 1) to discuss the status of services and how the casework is proceeding; and 2) to allow the OAG to negotiate a stipulation with the parties. The ongoing worker attends the mediation.

Pre-Trial Hearing

- This date for the pre-trial hearing is set at the initial hearing and a pre-trial statement (completed by all attorneys on the case) is filed by OAG.
- A Pre-trial hearing occurs if the parents do not stipulate at mediation and if the case is proceeding to trial.
- The judge may ask about how the child is doing, so the ongoing social worker should attend.

Trial

- The trial must occur within 45 days if the child is at home (“conditional release”) or within 105 days if the child is in foster care (“shelter care”).
- No report is required; the AAG will notify the social worker if he or she is a witness needed for trial.

Disposition

- The disposition hearing takes place after a stipulation or trial. It is the first opportunity for the social worker to file a substantive, comprehensive report on the behavior issues that brought the family to the court’s attention, the agency’s plan to address these issues, and the efforts, thus far, by the agency and the family.
- The social worker will pick a permanency goal, can have concurrent goals at this stage, and will discuss what is needed to achieve those goals.
- If the case stipulates, disposition is set when the parties are before the judge and the judge will set a due date for the report. If the case proceeds to trial, the report is due 5 days before trial.

Review of Disposition

- This hearing usually occurs about 2-3 months after the disposition hearing and is a check-in on how the family is doing regarding the case plan.
- The report should reiterate the case plan and clearly detail the agency’s efforts to achieve the permanency goal so there are no surprises at the first permanency hearing if a goal change is requested. If it looks like reunification isn’t going to be viable, the report should indicate whether adoption or guardianship has been explored with the current caretaker and whether all kin been identified and explored.
- There may be more than one Review of Disposition hearings before the first permanency hearing.

1st Permanency Hearing

- This hearing must occur within 12 months of a child's entry into foster care and the date is set at the disposition hearing.
- This hearing is where the court will move from concurrent goals to the primary goal.
 - The agency should have already evaluated if reunification should remain the goal or if it's time for a goal change.
 - OAG should have provided legal advice around ASFA timelines, TPRs, etc. so this court report is legally sufficient for ASFA.

Other Types of Hearing

The hearings below are evidentiary hearings that may require a court report, if the judge has asked for an interim report or status report. Consult the AAG regarding whether a report is needed. The AAG will discuss with you if you are needed as a witness and what your responsibility is as the ongoing worker:

- Revocation of protective supervision
- TaL
- Guardianship trial
- Adoption show cause, trial
- Termination of parental rights



Practice Tips

Testifying in Court

Some Basic Do's and Don'ts

Do...

- Do be on time.
- Do be honest, alert and articulate.
- Do remember that it is better to be unsure than to answer incorrectly. The AAG can “refresh your recollection” (jog your memory) if you need help.
- Do review your contact notes and case plans carefully beforehand. Often the opposing counsel has read them and will ask you specific questions about the content!
- Do reinforce what's in your court report, and make sure your report is detailed and informative about progress on the case plan.
- Do articulate your clinical opinion and recommendations. You are the clinician in the courtroom!
- Do take the time you need to listen to the question, and answer what is being asked. Don't rush to what you think the answer is “supposed” to be. If you are not sure what the question is asking, say so!

Don't...

- Don't take things personally or get defensive. Maintain your professional composure at all times! Your AAG will “clean up” any answers that may not come out the way you intended.
- Don't worry everything depends on you, because usually you are not the only witness. Having sufficient witnesses is the AAG's responsibility, not yours.
- Don't make conclusive statements, like: “mom was drunk.” Instead, make your case with descriptive statements like “mom's words were slurred, and she smelled of alcohol.”
- Don't offer your personal opinion or recommendations. You are there as a representative of the agency, so speak to what the agency wants/recommends.