



BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION:

HOW CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES IN ALASKA'S
MATANUSKA-SUSITNA BOROUGH (MAT-SU) IMPROVED
FAMILY CONTACT AND SET THE STAGE FOR
FUTURE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

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OVERVIEW

This case story presents lessons learned from the Family Contact Improvement Partnership (FCIP), a cross-sector collaboration between agencies working with children in the foster care system to improve family contact procedures in Alaska's Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su). FCIP is not solely an early childhood focused initiative. Alaska's low population density¹ over large and diffuse terrain often leads boroughs to create programs that can meet several priority areas at once. Still, the FCIP has a specific focus on healthy family development and addressing systemic gaps in service coordination for younger children in the foster care system who are facing increased risk of adverse child experiences. Thus, much of the initiative is particularly targeted to families with younger children.

Part of a larger NICHQ project, [Early Childhood Health Equity Landscape Project \(ECHE\)](#), this case story is one of three that highlights bright spots in multi-sector early childhood health equity initiatives around the country with the common themes of:

- > Meeting the diverse needs of families and community providers
- > Committing to lift the voice of and center families and caregivers, both individually and collectively

Recognizing that improving the family contact process was going to be a major effort that would require family feedback and engagement, R.O.C.K. Mat-Su took a step back. They realized that they hadn't appreciated the scope of the problems that needed fixing, or how the major players in the OCS process conceptualized family contact. Rather than diving into family engagement, R.O.C.K. Mat-Su understood the importance of establishing a neutral, fact-driven assessment of the family contact policies and processes and fostering a shared understanding of major issues to be addressed before bringing families into the process.

R.O.C.K. Mat-Su is a "cross-sector collaborative of community members joining together to promote family resilience and reduce child maltreatment in Alaska's Mat-Su Borough." www.rockmatsu.org/

Information in this case story is drawn from interviews with two community leaders working at a cross-sector collective to advance early childhood health equity programs, documents created by the FCIP, and borough-level demographic data from the Mat-Su.

Early Childhood Health Equity Landscape Project Early Childhood Health Equity (ECHE)

work seeks to strengthen early childhood systems to support healthy child development and reduce health inequities and disparities that can have a lifelong impact.

In an effort to understand how ECHE work is carried out at the local, state, and national levels, the **ECHE Landscape Project**, a joint venture of the National Institute for Children's Health Quality (NICHQ) and Child Trends and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, gathered and analyzed information on cross-sector initiatives promoting early childhood health equity through the **ECHE Landscape Survey**. To provide context to the ECHE Survey, the ECHE Landscape Project team has also held conversations with ECHE initiatives to inform a series of spotlight briefs on the topics of health equity, measuring and reporting progress and impact, sustainability, cross-sector partnerships, and state-local collaborations. The information from the landscape survey and series of spotlight briefs is intended to support innovation across sectors to advance health equity for young children.

Key insights include the importance of:

- > Seeking external expert help to accurately identify the issues
- > Using a shared vision to build collaboration
- > Improving the system to benefit individual agencies and organizations
- > Engaging families most impacted by the system

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BACKGROUND

Alaska's Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su), located north of Anchorage, is the second most populous borough in the state², with a little over 100,000 people spread out "in an area the size of West Virginia," said Lindsay Prunella, Operations Manager for Raising Our Children with Kindness (R.O.C.K.) Mat-Su. Housed in the Mat-Su Health Foundation, R.O.C.K. Mat-Su is a cross-sector collective of more than 60 agencies working to end child maltreatment and promote family resilience. Unlike initiatives based in states with more dense populations, R.O.C.K. Mat-Su's collective impact work often means prioritizing programming and policies that impact the greatest number of children and families throughout multiple systems of service, from the education system to the substance abuse treatment system to the foster care system. As Betsy Larson, current director of R.O.C.K. Mat-Su explained, "R.O.C.K. Mat-Su sometimes has difficulty staying in one lane, like early childhood, because our vision is broader than that. We work to benefit all ages of children, but we acknowledge that early childhood is a particularly critical phase and efforts tend to center around youngest children."

Children in out-of-home placements who frequently connect with their parents are more likely to be reunified and may also feel less depression and anxiety and have fewer problem behaviors.^{3,4} To foster this frequent connection between families and children, in 2017, a superior court judge in the Mat-Su family court system reached out to R.O.C.K. Mat-Su to look at ways to improve these connections for families who have children in out-of-home placements and involved with the Office of Children's Services (OCS) system. As a result, R.O.C.K. Mat-Su partnered with the University of Denver's Butler Institute for Families and the Office of Children's Services to build the Family Contact Improvement Partnership (FCIP).

Working collaboratively across such a large area also requires being intentional when bringing partners together, best exemplified by R.O.C.K. Mat-Su's recent work with Alaska's Office of Children's Services (OCS). Prunella recalled that the former (and founding) Director of R.O.C.K. Mat-Su, Desiré Shepler, often shared the story of how the work was started. "All of us, including Desiré, thought it would include bringing together a couple of our partners and would be easy to change," Prunella said. They were mistaken.

"Once the original small group of partners started to learn more about the local challenges with family contact, it was rabbit hole after rabbit hole," recalled Prunella. "It was so much more complicated than they originally thought and clearly wouldn't be fixed in a month." The constellation of agencies providing supervised family contact all had their own methods of working with parents. Some agencies used a partnership approach, providing helpful feedback and parent coaching, while others maintained a more hands-off approach by observing silently, documenting, and only intervening or interacting with the parent if there was a serious safety concern. Additionally, there was no standard for communicating with families from their initial entry into the OCS system through reunification.

A major complicating factor in standardizing family contact was the sheer size of the Mat-Su Borough. The regional OCS in Mat-Su was caring for more than 800 children, and due to shortages in foster care and kinship placement, some children were placed hundreds of miles away from their parents, making family contact difficult to standardize. "We also home children from other parts of the state when there are no foster or kinship placements available in their region," said Prunella. "Some of those kids are 800 miles away from their parents."



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SEEKING EXTERNAL EXPERT HELP TO ACCURATELY IDENTIFY THE ISSUES

Shepler immediately recognized that family contact was too unwieldy to solve with just a few partners. “When they realized the complications they were dealing with, Desiré started seeking out organizations that have specializations around families and the child welfare system to help understand what was going on,” said Prunella. R.O.C.K. Mat-Su reached out to the University of Denver’s Butler Institute for Families, which collaborates with localities to provide needs assessments, training and technical assistance, and program evaluation for child welfare systems. R.O.C.K. Mat-Su asked the Butler Institute to conduct an evaluation of family contact processes for children in out-of-home placement in the Mat-Su OCS region, with the goal of understanding the major issues that needed to be addressed and, more specifically, how OCS families experienced family contact.

The Butler Institute’s evaluation revealed three major areas for improvement within Mat-Su’s OCS family contact system, which provided a starting point for progress. The first was a lack of family-meeting locations across the Mat-Su borough, which resulted in some families having less contact with their children due to travel barriers. The second was of the few family-meeting locations that did exist, there was a lack of family-friendly OCS spaces for families to visit with their children. “We didn’t realize how many families were meeting in conference rooms and office settings, rather than home-like environments where they could feel like they were having family time,” said Prunella. Finally, the Butler Institute found that there was a lack of training and support for professionals facilitating family contact about how to interact and providing coaching to parents: “A lot of our OCS staff felt unsupported and asked for more training on how to work with families,” recalled Prunella.

USING A SHARED VISION TO BUILD COLLABORATION

The Butler Institute’s evaluation uncovered systemic challenges in family contact that spanned the entire child welfare process including training and supporting professionals, and onboarding and supporting both parents and foster/kinship placements. With that in mind, R.O.C.K. Mat-Su cast a wide net, inviting to the table “all local organizations who worked with OCS families or had an interest in improving the family contact system” to join the FCIP. With the Butler Institute facilitating the discussion, the FCIP was tasked with defining a shared vision to guide their work: family reunification is dependent on culturally centered family contact. They were then asked to come up with a goal to work toward: “The Community Partners unite so that families and children engage in meaningful, healthy, culturally-centered contact that is best for the child.”

“Once we agreed that reunification is important and cultural-centered contact is our goal, we were able to look at the challenges and work our way backwards,” said Prunella. Using their discussion, the Butler Institute then created a [theory of change](#)⁵ that the FCIP could use to understand potential pathways to address systemic issues in the OCS family contact system.

Like all community partners working in stressful and under-resourced health and welfare systems, the agencies in the FCIP had complex relationships with one another. Prunella explained, “We had all of these different partners that were at the table and a few of them were nervous because they had a long history or had complicated relationships with one another.” However, having the common agreement that reunification is important, the common goal of cultural-centered contact, and the theory of change as a shared vision for their work helped them view one another as partners. “We could work in harmony because the reality is that we are all working in the best interest of our community’s children. It doesn’t matter which agency you work for because we all want families to thrive. We want them to be successful. We want reunification, whenever possible,” said Prunella.

For Prunella, using a collective impact approach guided by a shared vision was revelatory. “It was magical,” she remembered. “I’ve never worked like that before, and it was really inspiring. It’s what is so amazing about collective impact and it was amazing to see our wild dreams for better family contact becoming closer to reality with every meeting.”

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IMPROVING THE SYSTEM TO BENEFIT INDIVIDUAL AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

From the beginning, the FCIP did not have to navigate a decrease in partner participation or engagement over time. Prunella explained, "We have been very lucky to have a core group that has been engaged in bimonthly two-hour meetings for over two years." When asked to describe why they think they've been able to retain interest, Larson cited R.O.C.K. Mat-Su's willingness to take on work that agencies may not have the resources or capacity to tackle individually. "Our local [Mat-Su] OCS has welcomed collaborative work to do this deep work in a community-wide partnership. They recognize that this is not a perfect system and that they are under-resourced in many ways and the partnership can help them make the work of supporting families and working towards reunification easier, since we all want the best care for our children," Larson said.

Larson also highlighted the importance of honoring the different ways in which agencies are poised to work due to systemic issues. "A lot of our agencies have to be in crisis mode with all of their work. They have to have a quick response to an issue, put a Band-Aid on the problem, fix things quickly," she said. "Our collective has the luxury of being able to use a prevention model and work toward goals far down the line. It's slower work but with intention behind it. I think it's satisfying for our partners: we can work together at a different pace to solve systemic problems that will make their day-to-day work more effective."

ENGAGING FAMILIES MOST IMPACTED BY THE SYSTEM

Prunella and Larson were open about the difficulties of fostering family engagement in the FCIP in an area as large as the Mat-Su. "We have found it difficult to hold advisory groups that represent the whole borough, because we have a huge geographical challenge," said Larson. "We've tried a number of different things, and now provide a stipend for participation, childcare, and mileage so that parents can come to the FCIP and be compensated for their participation."

Despite the challenges in engagement of families through advisory groups, the FCIP has successfully welcomed feedback from families on their experiences with the child welfare system, particularly soliciting the experiences of parents who have not been reunified with their children. "We had one parent who did not reunify with her children and she was able to speak to what was really de-motivating in her contact with agencies. She pointed to the conversations that had helped her realize she needed to put herself and her health first and get through recovery to be able to be the parent her children needed," said Prunella. "It was interesting to learn how the people that she interacted with helped her, but also hear how being able to participate in family contact in a different way would have really helped motivate her to create a different environment and expand her social supports, to potentially connect those dots quicker for her." If there had been deeper engagement and clarification with the parent earlier, she may have been motivated and had the supports she needed.

LOOKING AHEAD

Since the creation of the FCIP in 2017, the group has created best practice guidebooks and trainings for child welfare professionals, foster parents, and family time supporters to communicate with families in a way that centers the needs of the child. The FCIP has also created standardized documents for families in the OCS system to understand family contact and for professionals to document supervised contact between parents and children. While these efforts have focused primarily on professionals and foster parents, the FCIP recognizes that moving forward they must also resolve communication and contact issues for families in the child welfare system.

For both Larson and Prunella, engaging more families in the next phase of the FCIP's work is a primary priority to address everything from how families experience supervised contact to how they understand the child welfare system. "When we were working on family contact, we realized that there is no orientation or roadmap for parents who enter the child welfare system here in the Mat-Su. We have parents at their most vulnerable with only an overstretched caseworker to provide guidance," said Prunella. "All of us are interested in a universal orientation, one that would be centered on the needs of the families. We are working with our partner agencies to find families that could help us with this."

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In the coming months and years, the FCIP will work to bring families who are involved in the child welfare system to the table to inform the planning of the work from the perspective of the population which is most impacted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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