

# CFRP POLICY BRIEF

## Enhancing Collaborative Practice between Domestic Violence Staff and Child Protective Services Staff

Child Protective Services (CPS) and domestic violence centers are two institutions dedicated to ensuring the safety of Texas families. Child maltreatment and domestic violence often occur within the same families, thus CPS and domestic violence centers share many mutual clients. Despite their shared goals, CPS and domestic violence centers have different service philosophies and procedures that can come into conflict when working with families who are involved with CPS and also receiving domestic violence services.

Both CPS staff and domestic violence staff show commitment to improving their communication and collaboration regarding dual-involved clients. In late 2015, four domestic violence centers across Texas began designing pilot initiatives to enhance their relationships with CPS. Overseen by the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) under the umbrella of Project S.A.F.E. (Survivors Are Fundamental to the Equation), the initiatives tested innovative new strategies for cross-system collaboration, including joint trainings, designated liaisons to facilitate communication between agencies, and policy revisions to promote coordinated service delivery.

While this work is ongoing, the first year of Project S.A.F.E. has already yielded important lessons to inform the second year of the project, and other communities interested in improving collaboration between domestic violence centers and CPS. The lessons learned provide a strong foundation on which to further enhance collaboration and coordination for the benefit of children and families who are dually-involved with both of these critical social service systems.

### Background

Child Protective Services (CPS) and domestic violence centers serve many of the same clients, yet these two entities can experience considerable obstacles to effective collaboration. Whereas CPS is a program within the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, with a legal mandate to protect children from abuse and neglect, domestic violence centers are voluntary grassroots organizations focused on empowering and supporting survivors of domestic violence. The challenging

relationship between CPS and domestic violence centers stems from many factors, including the sometimes conflicting policies and mandates of the systems in which they operate, as well as differences in service philosophy and understanding of domestic violence. For example, CPS may *require* parents, as a condition of maintaining custody of a child, to complete services, find alternative housing, or restrict contact with an individual who has been violent; yet by design, domestic violence centers provide information, services, and support but *do not mandate* that their clients participate in services or take action to leave an abusive situation. Furthermore, during an open CPS

*Both parties share the goal of promoting safe and healthy families, but their different approaches may hurt the effectiveness of services they provide.*

investigation, the federal confidentiality policies that domestic violence centers must abide by conflict with CPS case processes and policies. Both parties share the goal of promoting safe and healthy families, but their different approaches to this goal cause considerable tension, which may ultimately hurt the effectiveness of the services they provide for dual-involved clients.

The Texas State Legislature has recognized this problem and, in response, convened the *Task Force to Address the Relationship between Domestic Violence and Child Abuse and Neglect* to examine how CPS and domestic violence centers jointly handle domestic violence cases involving children. As a result of the Task Force's work, CPS rolled out new Disposition Guidelines for Domestic Violence in 2015 and 2016. There are two key philosophical shifts underpinning the new guidelines: 1) Perpetrators (not victims) are solely responsible for their use of violence and must be held accountable; and 2) Enhancing the safety of the non-offending adult victim in a domestic violence case enhances the safety of the child or children.

## Project S.A.F.E. (Survivors are Fundamental to the Equation)

In response to the work of the Task Force, CPS has been instituting a top-down cultural shift by revising policy guidelines, and the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) has been simultaneously working with four communities across the state to test locally-specific strategies for improving collaboration from the ground up. Under the Project S.A.F.E. pilot, TCFV funded the communities to implement four primary strategies:

1. Developing original cross-trainings for CPS staff and domestic violence staff;
2. Participating in local CPS trainings on the new Disposition Guidelines for Domestic Violence;
3. Funding Enhanced CPS Liaison positions to support clients who are dually-involved with both CPS and domestic violence services, and to build relationships with CPS staff; and
4. Revising internal policies for working with dual-involved clients and communicating with CPS.

The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is conducting an implementation evaluation of Project S.A.F.E. to understand the extent to which these pilot initiatives are improving communication and collaboration between domestic violence staff and CPS staff. Preliminary evaluation findings from the first year of the project have already highlighted some important lessons learned.

## Lessons Learned in Year One:

### **Improved collaboration between CPS and domestic violence centers is needed.**

CPS staff and domestic violence staff both express a strong desire to improve their interactions and collaboration for the sake of their clients. Staff on both sides want to build relationships with one another and better understand one another's practices and limitations.

*Staff from both CPS and domestic violence centers want to build stronger relationships to better understand the other's work.*

### **Enhanced CPS Liaisons are a promising model for building specialized knowledge and advocacy within domestic violence centers.**

Currently, all domestic violence centers that receive funding from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission must designate a CPS Liaison, but this unfunded mandate does not provide centers with the resources needed to fully implement this role. During year one, Project S.A.F.E. funded full-time Enhanced CPS Liaisons at two project sites. The full-time Enhanced CPS Liaisons addressed tensions by serving as central points of contact for CPS, building relationships between agencies, developing specialized knowledge about CPS practices and policies, and managing cases for dual-involved clients.

### **Cross-trainings and Enhanced CPS Liaisons have started to build understanding between domestic violence staff and CPS staff.**

Through newly-developed cross-trainings for CPS and domestic violence staff, as well as the Enhanced CPS Liaisons, staff from both organizations have improved their knowledge of their counterparts' operations, motivations, and limitations. The increased awareness of one another's policies and regulations has improved communication between domestic violence and CPS staff, and has potential to ease friction on the ground.

### **Philosophical shifts within CPS enhance the alignment between CPS and domestic violence centers on some key issues.**

CPS's new Disposition Guidelines for Domestic Violence, which rolled out statewide at the same time as the Project S.A.F.E. pilot, were integral to the advances that have taken place during Project S.A.F.E. The cultural and practice shifts within CPS with regard to assigning dispositions to domestic violence cases laid an essential foundation for the progress made by the pilots. The shift towards perpetrator accountability, and increased recognition of the connection between the safety of adult victims and the safety of their children, have been particularly helpful in building a shared understanding of appropriate CPS responses to domestic violence.

### **Key tensions between CPS and domestic violence centers are structural and will require attention from statewide leadership.**

A major challenge to improving collaboration is that some tensions stem from policy-level factors that frontline staff cannot change. For example, the primary frustration that CPS personnel have with domestic violence centers is their confidentiality policies, which are mandated by federal legislation. Similarly, domestic violence staff have difficulty meeting 24-hour CPS investigative timelines for high priority cases, which are set by the Texas State Legislature, and they often oppose child removal decisions that are outside of caseworker discretion.

## Moving Forward

The Project S.A.F.E. pilot project will continue through the summer of 2017. The lessons learned during the project's first year provide important considerations for continuing work on improving relationships at the intersection of domestic violence and child welfare.

- Project S.A.F.E. revealed considerable variation in the relationships between domestic violence centers and local CPS offices across Texas. Programs in larger cities appear to face different challenges to serving dual-involved clients than those in smaller and more rural communities. The community-level variation in relationships will require flexible solutions that allow for adaptation to local circumstances, always within the constraints of CPS and domestic violence center policies.
- Local initiatives can improve some aspects of the relationships between CPS and domestic violence centers, but broader change will also require input from statewide leadership because of the central role of policy constraints in the tensions between these social service providers. The Disposition Guidelines, which seek to shift CPS away from treating victims of domestic violence as perpetrators of neglectful supervision, and toward holding perpetrators of domestic violence accountable, highlight the improvements that are possible when policy change comes from the top down.
- Among the Project S.A.F.E. initiatives, the Enhanced CPS Liaison is a promising approach that merits expansion and further evaluation. The role of the Enhanced CPS Liaison varied considerably across pilot sites in response to local needs and characteristics. However, having a full-time, dedicated Liaison improved the support provided to dual-involved clients and strengthened relationships and mutual understanding between domestic violence centers and CPS. Moving forward, TCFV will develop tools and best practices for establishing Enhanced CPS Liaison positions, and welcomes collaboration with communities wishing to develop this role.

*Flexible solutions are needed to help solve community-level variation.*

Domestic violence centers and CPS are two institutions with common goals, yet often conflicting philosophies and practices, and whose ability to serve vulnerable Texans can depend on their successful collaboration. Navigating the complicated intersection between domestic violence and child welfare requires specialized knowledge and deliberate attention. Findings from year one of Project S.A.F.E. suggest that dedicating resources to this intersection has the potential strengthen relationships between CPS and domestic violence centers, and improve the support and services given to dual-involved clients.

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*The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.*