

Successes in Increasing Reunification: Norfolk Department of Human Services 2007-2009

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The Norfolk Department of Human Services (NDHS) has focused on the needs of the entire family and lending support to the family unit itself. This, in part, explains the 51% increase of children being reunited with their families between 2007 and 2009. NDHS has been committed to engaging families early and providing services needed to preserve them. These services are identified by the family and agency “up front.” It is NDHS’ policy to seek out extended or fictive family when there is a breakdown of the nuclear family. This occurs at any entryway through which families engage NDHS.

Because of our commitment to families, social workers are trained with a focus on helping families identify their strengths. This skill helps them realize their own capacity to create safety and permanency plans, in conjunction with the agency, for their children. We are using [*The Family Centered Practice Model*](#) to help guide a family-centered decision making process.

As we continue with Family Engagement, utilizing all of the services that are available to workers and the families such as Family Team Meeting Engagement Services, we have seen increases in the number and quality of reunifications.

“In an effort to achieve true family engagement with the families in which we work, child welfare agencies often use a family teaming process referred to as family partnership meetings in an effort to deliberately and meaningfully involve families in the decision making process. Although various family partnership meetings exist, all meetings bring together a team of individuals in order to recognize that family members are their own experts and should always be consulted when decisions are made regarding safety, permanency, and well-being,” said Hayley Brooks, VDSS family services senior program consultant.

Since the implementation of Family Team Meetings, many children have been spared from entering foster care. This is because family members and their supports have come together with helping professionals to identify the needs of the children and families and create ways to meet these needs to strengthen families. This reflects the competence of the family when proper engagement techniques are used. Engaging, supporting, and empowering families do account for the increase in reunification rates at NDHS.