

# Working across Borders: Effective Permanency Practices at the Intersection of Child Welfare and Immigration

---

**Jorge Cabrera**

*Casey Family Programs  
San Diego, California*

**Yvonne Humenay Roberts**

*Casey Family Programs  
Seattle, Washington*

**Ada Lopez**

*Casey Family Programs  
San Antonio, Texas*

**Leo Lopez**

*Casey Family Programs  
Yakima, Washington*

**Ana Zepeda**

*Casey Family Programs  
Austin, Texas*

**Robin Sanchez**

*Casey Family Programs  
Boise, Idaho*

**Carol Punske**

*Casey Family Programs  
Tucson, Arizona*

**George Gonzalez**

*Casey Family Programs  
Seattle, Washington*

**Maria Nuño**

*Casey Family Programs  
San Diego, California*

**Lily Garay-Castro**

*Casey Family Programs  
Tucson, Arizona*

**Iris Lopez**

*Casey Family Programs  
Yakima, Washington*

**Terri Aguilera-Flemming**

*Casey Family Programs  
Yakima, Washington*

**Yoshimi Pelczarski**

*Casey Family Programs  
Seattle, Washington*

Children and families involved in the child welfare system and affected by immigration issues are among the most vulnerable populations. Casey Family Programs' direct services arm has developed promising practices to effectively support legal and relational permanency work with these families. Applying an implementation science framework, this article provides a descriptive case study of international immigration program implementation. Based on input from field office staff, we identified lessons learned from the common successes (e.g., relationship building, work with consulates, transnational practice) and challenges (e.g., detention and deportation, language barriers, workforce development) in implementing policies and practices aimed at improving outcomes for children and families at the intersection of immigration and child welfare. The hope is that these insights will inform other organizations as they look to implement policies and practices aimed at improving outcomes for these children and families.

Children and families involved in the child welfare system and for whom immigration considerations become prominent are among the most vulnerable. In addition to issues faced with being in the system, families comprised of immigrants may face additional challenges including legal barriers to accessing services; child and family trauma resulting from difficult immigration or refugee experiences, extended separation from parents and family members, or a parent's detention/deportation by immigration authorities; and acculturation and language issues (Dettlaff & Earner, 2012; Maiter, Stalker, & Alaggia, 2009; Segel & Mayadas, 2005). These challenges are especially relevant today, as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has increased its presence in communities around the country.

Nationally, more than 16.7 million people have at least one family member who is unauthorized living with them; this number includes 5.9 million citizen children under the age of 18 (Mathema, 2017). Deporting a family member, especially a parent, has serious detrimental impacts on children. In addition to emotional trauma and the loss of a parent and family economic instability, deportations can result in children entering the foster care system (Dreby, 2012). National data indicates that children of immigrants represent 8.6% of all children who come to the attention of the child welfare system (Dettlaff & Earner, 2012).

Keeping families apart is not in the best interest of children. Research demonstrates that reunification with parents or placement with relatives results in better outcomes for children at the intersection of immigration and child welfare (Wessler & Freed, 2011). Many child welfare agencies struggle to work with these families given the many layers of complexity involved (e.g., legal, cultural, transnational). This is especially true when it comes to creating pathways to legal and relational permanency for children (e.g., Earner, 2007; Velazquez & Dettlaff, 2011). For example, international borders have been traditionally seen by child welfare agencies as significant barriers to permanency. Consequently, many agencies find it difficult to develop adequate policies and practices to address the needs of this population, which increases

the likelihood that children of immigrants will stay in care for lengthy periods and/or be more likely to age out of foster care.

The purpose of this paper is to provide insights based on how one organization has worked to implement policies and practices to address the needs of children and families at the intersection of immigration and child welfare. The hope is that the steps taken to implement a transnational program, along with the successes and challenges identified in this article, will help other organizations as they look to implement policies and practices aimed at improving outcomes for children and families.

## **Casey Family Programs' Child and Family Services**

Casey Family Programs (Casey) is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care. Casey's direct services arm, Child and Family Services (CFS), works directly with children and families in the context of their communities to develop, provide and demonstrate effective, practical solutions to safely reduce the need for foster care, improve well-being, and secure safe and lifelong families for every child in their care. CFS operates in nine field offices in five states—Arizona, California, Idaho, Texas and Washington—that provide direct services to urban, suburban, and rural communities. The CFS practice model prioritizes an urgent and relentless approach to achieving legal permanency for all youth and emphasizes the importance of relational permanency. The current article includes information shared by seven of Casey's field offices.

## **Context**

This work grew out of direct experiences working with children whose parents are immigrants, or who are immigrants themselves. Each of Casey's field offices recognized this as a population in need of special attention. All of the children and youth reflected in this article were in public agency foster care, with Casey operating as either the

child-placing agency with oversight of the case, or as a partner with the jurisdictional Child Protective Services (CPS) agency who has oversight. Public child welfare agencies often refer families to Casey CFS if they feel Casey is a good fit for the youth and families' circumstances.

Casey's work at the intersection of immigration and child welfare grew from the need to fully understand the complexity of circumstances and the resources needed to support these families who are vulnerable. Responding to the needs of these children and families by developing specific practices was intentional and meant to improve outcomes. At the onset, Casey's work was primarily with families from Mexico and Guatemala; however, this work has expanded in the Boise field office to include older refugee youth and their families seeking asylum from war-torn areas in the Middle East and Africa. In 2008, the Yakima field office served a group of four siblings ranging in age from 1–8 years whose home was raided by ICE. The youth were traumatized by this event, during which weapons were drawn and their mother was taken and deported to Guatemala. This first experience and subsequent cases have helped shape the work, creating guidelines and best practices within CFS that are now being established for international social work across all nine field offices.

This work developed over the course of the last 10 years in parallel to other community, state and national initiatives. Communities and states have seen both population changes (e.g., an increase in the number of immigrant families) and policy changes (e.g., state-level differences in the timing, required participants and contents of a case plan) that can have direct implications for this work. New legislation at the federal level (e.g., Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018) can support the priorities of state and local child welfare through provisions, targeted federal funds, and focus on specific desired outcomes.

The Trump administration, through a series of executive orders (EO) on immigration and refugees (i.e., the January 2017 EOs on border security and interior enforcement, and refugees and visa holders from designated nations), has rolled back protections for children and

families entering the United States. Between October 1, 2017, and April 20, 2018, more than 700 children were separated from their parents (Dickerson, 2018). On May 4, 2018, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced that it would begin referring all immigrants apprehended crossing the U.S. border for criminal charges, even if they are a parent or asylum seekers. As a result, more than 2,300 children crossing the border between May 5 and June 9 were separated from the adults who were caring for them, rendering them unaccompanied (Almukhtar, Griggs, & Yourish, 2018). Under federal law, unaccompanied children are sent into the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), where they become part of the federal foster care system. On June 20, President Trump signed an EO ending his administration's family separation policy, however, no clarity was provided on how already separated families would be reunited. As of July 24, most of the children taken into U.S. custody between May and June had not been reunited with their families, and over 450 parents may have been deported without their children (Jordan & Dickerson, 2018).

## ***Method***

This article uses an implementation science framework to illustrate work undertaken by Casey CFS at the intersection of immigration and child welfare. Implementation science is the study of factors that influence the full and effective use of innovations in practice (Blase, Van Dyke, Fixsen, & Bailey, 2012). There are four distinct implementation stages (*Exploration*, *Installation*, *Initial Implementation*, and *Full Implementation*) that while not linear, are each necessary for successful and sustained implementation (Mets & Bartley, 2012).

During the *Exploration* stage, teams work to identify the need and target population, acquire information on what is already known and where more learning or knowledge is needed, and assess readiness, fit, and capacity of a system to engage in a new innovation. The function of the *Installation* stage is to identify the tasks to complete before program implementation. Activities include staff selection, initial training,

development of resource guides, and assuring access to necessary materials (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). *Initial Implementation* is the start of the program. During this stage, teams begin to use newly acquired skills and identify any additional supports needed to sustain the program (e.g., development of staff competencies, changes in organizational culture; National Implementation Research Network, 2017). *Full Implementation* occurs when 50% or more of practitioners and staff are using the intervention in the way it was designed. During this stage, innovative practices are integrated into an organizations way of working, becoming standard practice supported by the organization (Mets & Bartley, 2012).

This article is a descriptive case study of community-based, transnational work underway in seven field offices across five states, focusing on the lessons learned and practice implications during their exploration, installation, and initial implementation stages. Full implementation is not included here, as most offices are still in the initial stages of implementation. Narrative descriptions and case study examples developed by each field office represent a retrospective, longitudinal view of international immigration program implementation.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Narrative accounts were developed by field office leads (i.e., social workers, supervisors, directors) that included descriptions of the office's exploration, installation, and initial implementation stages. Several calls were held by lead authors with field office leads to explain the process and answer questions. A template was provided to assist in data collection. In addition, each field office was asked to provide case study examples and lessons learned from their direct work. Descriptions were combined across the seven field offices and analyses were conducted by lead authors through an iterative process of peer consulting and debriefing. During this iterative analysis, lead authors separately reviewed the information provided by field offices, analyzing it for themes and insights. Lead authors then shared their analyses with each other to

generate meaning, construct categories and identify themes. This process was executed multiple times, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings. Final results were shared with field office leads to ensure it accurately reflected their input.

## Results

Table 1 summarizes the core activities summarized across the field offices for each implementation stage. Highlights from each stage are described below.

### *Exploration*

Case-level exploration through a variety of assessment activities and qualitative case notes identified barriers and facilitators to legal permanency and specific practices (e.g., family finding, family group conferences) to be reinforced for use with this population. Discussions with children, youth, and families in care that were contending with immigration issues provided feedback about what services they needed, and how to help them feel safe engaging in services when they may be hesitant to do so due to their legal status. Internal knowledge regarding cultural understanding, familiarity with available resources, comfort level with the Spanish language (given that the majority of clients served were from Latin American countries), and understanding of the process aspects of the work was assessed. Several areas of specialized training for working with children from immigrant families or children who are immigrants themselves were identified.

These analyses resulted in several key conclusions. First, the impact of trauma on behavioral and emotional responses that may require therapeutic intervention among children of immigrant families in foster care and their caregivers are significant and prevalent. According to field office staff, many of the youth served in the field offices are dealing with anxiety, depression, and a fear that they and their families will never be safe. According to many youth who live in households that

are mixed-status, they fear ICE raids and deportation, especially given the heightened rhetoric nationally. Even first generation citizens worry that their status is not absolute and that their citizenship could be taken away. They live with a heightened sense of unease that anything they do could change things, and that they have to “stay out of trouble” as the consequences are too great. Many youth are also dealing with depression, especially those that are disconnected from their families and traditions. They talk about feeling lost, trapped in the middle between U.S. customs and their familial culture and traditions. Youth who have been separated from their families for extended periods of time have difficulties reestablishing relationships and trust. This causes anger, separation anxiety, and attachment problems. Children and families who are refugees also are dealing with the trauma that led to their refugee status due to genocide, living in refugee camps, and emigration to a new country, which can add to their trauma and further complicate meeting their mental health needs.

Second, parents (birth, foster, adoptive) need better preparation to understand their rights. The concept and practice of adoption and termination of parental rights is not prevalent in other countries as they are in the U.S. child welfare context. When their children become involved in foster care, parents often are not aware that they have rights, regardless of their immigration status. Their rights as a parent include the right to an attorney, right to attend hearings, right to an interpreter, right to be in contact with their child and their child’s caseworker, and right to have a reunification plan written in a language they understand. Because Casey staff understand the rights of families, they actively advocate for those rights, even when parents are living across the border. Many parents that Casey works with also have rights as Mexican citizens, in particular access to the Mexican Consulate, where they can find support, legal and advocacy services. Because many of these parents are not familiar with the U.S. legal and foster care systems, the burden falls on the child welfare worker to help parents understand their rights and access necessary services and supports. However, many caseworkers are also unfamiliar with the rights of immigrant families. When parents do

**Table 1. Core Intervention Strategies for Serving Immigrant Children by Implementation Stage Across Field Offices**

Implementation Stage			
Exploration	Installation	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
<p>Conduct assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of internal policies, procedures, training curricula and interagency contracts</li> <li>• Review of local, regional and state-based protocols and tools</li> <li>• Review current community resources</li> <li>• Interview stakeholders</li> <li>• Identify partnerships and relationships to be built or strengthened</li> </ul> <p>Case level exploration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case mining</li> <li>• Identify specific practices</li> </ul>	<p>Outreach to Mexican and Guatemalan Consulates</p> <p>Built bidirectional partnerships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mexican and Guatemalan Consulate</li> <li>• International Liaison office</li> <li>• Legal Immigration agencies</li> <li>• Catholic Charities</li> <li>• CPS workers</li> </ul> <p>Protocol development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International staff travel</li> <li>• Protocol to assist detained parents</li> <li>• Resource guides for families, social workers and community partners</li> </ul>	<p>Participation in task forces</p> <p>Strengthened partnerships</p> <p>Built additional partnerships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immigration attorneys</li> <li>• Judges</li> </ul> <p>Developed contracts with partner organizations</p> <p>Allocated flexible funds</p> <p>Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensive case management and service coordination</li> <li>• Safety planning</li> <li>• Family finding</li> <li>• Family group conferences</li> <li>• Home studies</li> <li>• Advocacy</li> <li>• Education</li> </ul>	<p>Training and mentorship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Across field offices</li> <li>• Local and state Attorney General, CASAs and GALS</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 1. Core Intervention Strategies for Serving Immigrant Children by Implementation Stage Across Field Offices (Continued)**

Implementation Stage			
Exploration	Installation	Initial implementation	Full Implementation
Internal knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess familiarity with available resources</li> <li>• Assess Spanish-language resources</li> <li>• Learn about documentation requirements</li> <li>• Learn about other Countries legal requirements</li> <li>• Identify training opportunities</li> </ul>	Staff education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immigration issues</li> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• State and federal policy</li> <li>• Specialized trainings</li> </ul>	Update protocols as necessary	

not know their rights, they oftentimes have limited contact with their child and either do not know or do not understand what is going on with their child's case, making reunification more difficult.

Third, federal policies and practices, including the uncertain status of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), the institution of the family separation policy at the border, and the increased number of ICE raids across the country, are creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust that may limit youth's and families' engagement in services for fear of consequences. Children, youth, and families in care contending with immigration issues reported a reluctance to provide information or engage in services for fear of ICE or police involvement. Most children served in the field offices, according to field office staff, had been directly affected or knew someone directly affected by said policies and practices. Many communities have directly experienced raids, racial profiling, and arrests. Videos, stories, and pictures of raids, the arrest of persons who are undocumented, deportation centers, and reunification of separated families are prevalent within communities and in both Spanish- and English-language media. Given the uncertain status of DACA, many older youth are in limbo as their special immigrant juvenile status (SIJS) application and approval process has been elongated. Some youth have verbalized not wanting to age out of the foster care system without legal residency, as they fear deportation. Other youth fear applying at all, worried to give the U.S. government personal information. Other families are refusing services, including food stamps, WIC programs, behavioral and mental health services, and early education services, as they worry that once the government has their information, they or their relatives could get "picked up" at any time.

Fourth, there is limited knowledge and resources for conducting practices (e.g., family finding, home visits) across borders. Further, assumptions are sometimes made regarding the quality and resources of systems available in other countries, as compared to the systems in the United States. For instance, strengths in one country might be viewed as limitations in the other, and vice versa (e.g., intergenerational

homes and social support provided by grandparents living in the home may be prioritized elsewhere, where it could be viewed as a lack of independence and/or financial stability in the United States). Culture and cultural understanding are vital in healing for these youth and families. Having a therapist who could relate to a family's culture and take the time to work through intergenerational trauma, depression, anxiety, and guilt associated with initial separation helps to reestablish trust and familial bonds. Well-intentioned therapists can create more issues if they do not understand that *la cultura cura*—"culture heals"—and employ that approach in all the work that they do with these families.

Finally, a number of systemic barriers were identified, including limited public child welfare system-level capacity for understanding and responding to the need of immigrant families; limited or nonexistent policies and procedures to respond to family needs; lack of knowledge about how these children and families are affected; lack of cross-system collaboration; lack of knowledge regarding international social work protocols; and limited transnational strategies to locate and engage relatives. Analyses revealed lack of cultural and contextual understanding across jurisdictions and ongoing turnover of CPS staff, which required repeated training and knowledge sharing by Casey field office staff. Taking the time to help families understand their rights, what is happening in their case, breaking down legalese, and explaining to them what their options are is imperative. However, this can be difficult when Spanish-speaking social workers are not available.

### *Installation*

One of the first steps in establishing processes for improving outcomes for children and families who are immigrants was for each office to establish or deepen relationships and networks with agencies in the community and internationally, including the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, Catholic Charities, the Center for Legal and Social Justice, and the Mexican and Guatemalan

Consulates. These relationships were established using both formal and informal means (e.g., providing clinics, attending information sessions).

Work was also done with agencies that were successfully serving and already trusted by immigrant families to develop and strengthen partnerships, listen and learn, and adapt Casey's engagement strategies to meet the unique needs of the youth and families. Field offices developed contracts for services offered by partner organizations if they themselves could not meet a family's specific needs. They worked to identify and collaborate with immigration experts within other field offices and the community at large, bilingual bicultural social workers, members of Latino and refugee communities, judges, faith-based communities, and immigration attorneys and paralegals who have interest and passion for working with families who are immigrants.

These partnerships have yielded many benefits, including clarification regarding immigration policies and procedures, clinical case consultation, translator services, and legal clinics, and help with key paperwork and licensing for families. Relationship building with community legal aid services (i.e., Catholic Charities and Casa Cornelia Law Firm) and with the Mexican Consulate in San Diego, for instance, was critical in assisting a client in applying for a U-VISA (victims of a crime) and in obtaining a Mexican passport. Relationships with CPS peers also helps Casey advocate on behalf of families. In one case, when CPS was hesitant to reunify a sibling group of four with their mother because of concerns that they might be deported before completion of service planning, the Seattle field office successfully leveraged their relationship to engage the department in conversations about barriers and safety planning to ultimately reunify the family.

### *Initial Implementation*

In response to the needs of those being served, several offices participated in collaborative workgroups and task forces that offer a range of services, including safety planning, education about legal rights, and advocacy. The Arizona field office, for example, was part of a

cross-system, transnational task force that included both American and Mexican judges, attorneys, and CPS to improve communication and develop a toolkit to increase capacity. The toolkit provides a checklist and expectations for judges, attorneys, and CPS specialists and establishes protocols to follow throughout the life of a case, including best practice for contact, visitation, and involvement in court hearings. A quick resource guide for assisting families that have been separated is included in the toolkit, as well as specific contacts for ICE (Southern Arizona Transnational Task Force, 2018).

CFS also developed a standard protocol for working with immigrant youth and families, which includes providing education and advocacy, developing safety plans, strengthening natural supports in the event of deportation, and assisting in the collection of important documents. In the event that field office staff do not have the expertise or bandwidth to support families in this way, they have engaged expert consultants and partnered with local community organizations to help families. For instance, the Austin field office refers families to a local Unitarian Universalist church for assistance with safety planning. Finally, they have created guidelines for international social work practice and allocated flexible funds for international travel.

Specialized trainings were held to help staff learn about Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), safety planning with families without legal status, and how to engage with families in culturally appropriate ways. Some offices have also incorporated specific curriculums (i.e., *Powerful Families* in the Idaho office located in Boise) to support immigrant families and relative caregivers through financial literacy, advocacy, and leadership to empower them to be a resource to others and to build social networks of support and protection. Staff also incorporated an international lens and established processes for use with social media and family finding strategies (e.g., Seneca searches, genograms) to locate parents and family.

Several field offices have put together a list of resources specific to immigration issues that they use to educate families, community members, and CPS partners. Materials include educational, legal and safety

planning resources for families, a list of culturally appropriate community programs and resources, and practice resources for professionals.

Offices have proactively worked to ensure they have at least one Spanish-speaking social worker or permanency specialist on staff to assign to cases with caregivers who are monolingual Spanish speakers. Offices without a Spanish-speaking staff person actively work to hire professionals with that skill, seeking providers in their network who are sensitive to immigration needs and are Spanish speakers. If a need arises for a provider who speaks a different language, they go into the community to fit the need. At least one office has purchased equipment that allows for simultaneous interpretation during team meetings so that families can keep up with the conversation and ask questions in real time.

Casey's recognized leadership and expertise in working with children from immigrant families has yielded several opportunities to teach and train the broader community. They are often sought to assist on specific cases, or to provide content expertise. Several offices have provided training and technical assistance to internal and external partners and stakeholders and conducted work transnationally in the interest of families. San Antonio field office management reviewed the recently published *International and Immigration Issues Resource Guide* (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2018). The guide provides practice guidance for assisting youth in applying for SIJS, answers to frequently asked questions about children in foster care who are foreign-born (e.g., What is the caseworkers responsibility if a child in care was born in another country?), and a list of CPS regional and state office immigration specialists, border liaisons, and regional attorneys.

## Discussion

The work that has been done thus far highlights important themes about the accomplishments and setbacks of initial implementation that were aimed at serving children whose parents are immigrants,

or who are immigrants themselves. Although each field office is housed within a unique state context and planned distinct strategies, the overall implementation approach was comparable and built upon similar successes. Importantly, the study also revealed commonalities across sites in regards to challenges experienced during implementation. Findings particularly emphasize the value of the exploration stage and its relevance for establishing shared vision (Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013). This beginning stage of implementation assisted each field office with increasing its knowledge and provided the opportunity for incorporating the views of youth and families directly affected.

### ***Intervention and Implementation Successes and Challenges***

The relevance of this work to the field extends beyond specific intervention and implementation activities to include lessons learned from the common successes and challenges faced by the field offices in doing this work. Seven successes and six challenges were identified through an iterative process of peer consulting and debriefing. We expect that agencies trying on this work can benefit from learning from these experiences.

#### ***Implementation Successes***

*Relationships and Teaming.* A prevalent and powerful theme was relationships. Casey social workers developed relationships built on transparency and a shared understanding of family strengths, needs and desired outcomes. They believed that effective teamwork is essential to success. This included teaming with children and families, and local community partners to ensure adequacy of resources and effective coalitions. Effective partnerships are a hallmark of this work and pivotal to the achievement of positive outcomes and broader system improvement efforts (e.g., Dettlaff, Vidal de Haymes, Velazquez, Mindell, & Bruce, 2009; Earner, 2007; Segal & Mayadas, 2005).

Inter- and intra-agency teams guided this work from exploration through initial implementation. Field offices worked in tandem with CPS staff, community partners, and transnational agencies to ensure children and families received the needed support. These teams developed protocols, altered practices, and served as champions for youth and families.

*Engagement and Collaboration.* Across the field offices, intentional efforts to engage relevant stakeholders from planning through the initial implementation stage enabled bidirectional partnership, mutual respect and agreed-upon strategies in service to children and families.

*Work with Consulates.* The strategic relationships built with Consulates have been one of the most critical and supportive factors in this work, providing guidance, and ongoing contact between social workers and the various systems of education, public services, and child welfare agencies in other countries such as the Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF) in Mexico (Dettlaff & O'Grady, 2014).

*Transnational Practice.* This work would not be possible without the ability to conduct casework across borders. Each of the field offices offered examples of ways in which the work with families moved forward because they were able to respond to needs internationally. This work also required practitioners' willingness to take on more intense and complex work. The achievement of permanency in many instances was largely a result of the practitioners sustained focus and tenacious commitment to the best interests of the children and families (Dettlaff & O'Grady, 2015).

*Advocacy and Education.* Staff's ability to educate families, each other and the child welfare community through this work resulted in numerous accounts of overcoming permanency barriers. Their advocacy skills on behalf of youth and families, as well as their ability to help youth and families advocate for themselves provided opportunities for engagement, well-being and permanency.

*Practice Guidance.* Casey's practice model is youth-and-family-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive. It values the

urgent and relentless pursuit of legal permanency for children and youth living in out-of-home care. The work with immigrant families epitomizes this value in action. Practitioners across offices recognized early on that permanency for these children and families may not be achieved without raising practice acumen. This work included elevating youth and family voice, highlighting the value of cross-cultural humility and responsiveness, use of practice tools (e.g., genograms, eco-maps, family group conferences), forging new partnerships and becoming knowledgeable about a variety of legal procedures.

*Leadership Support.* Casey leadership recognized the need to apply administrative flexibility and operate in new ways to facilitate cross-border practice. One example of this was the development of international travel guidelines, done in partnership with Casey's legal counsel, which allowed staff to travel to foreign countries and conduct this work.

### *Implementation Challenges*

*Fear of Deportation.* Children, youth, and families in care contending with immigration issues repeatedly reported a reluctance to provide information or become involved in the dependency process for fear of ICE or police involvement. This made it difficult to locate and contact parents or family, which led to delays in proper legal notification, lack of parental participation in court hearings, difficulty assigning attorneys, and a breakdown in child placement and/or visitation. For instance, after having spent time, energy and money on trying to adopt their great-niece, one couple served by the Austin field office without legal status withdrew from consideration out of fear that they would be reported to ICE.

*Detention and Deportation.* Fear of deportation and actual detention and deportation are both barriers to working with immigrant families identified in the literature (e.g., Dettlaff, Vidal de Haymes, Velazquez, Mindell, & Bruce, 2009; Dettlaff & Earner, 2012). Detention by ICE was another barrier identified during both exploration and implementation. Once they were detained, it was difficult to find or be granted

access to parents. Each detention center had their own protocol for making contact, there was no centralized system to locate people in custody, and workers were not always made aware when parents were moved between detention centers. This prevented social workers from providing parents with documentation and delivering them notice about upcoming court hearings. If deported, there were no clear guidelines about how to coordinate with DIF in Mexico to provide services and/or support.

*Paperwork and Licensing.* Children, families, and prospective caregivers reported difficulties obtaining necessary documentation, which made accessing services and supports difficult. Documentation challenges included not having a social security number to complete background checks, not knowing what specific documentation was necessary, not having access to a Spanish-language version of a document to complete, or providing documentation in Spanish, which often required translation and interpretation. Often, children came into the child welfare system without any legal status and lacking identifying documentation. This made it difficult to access behavioral health services, obtain the necessary travel documentation to visit relatives abroad, and access legal services as adults to pursue U.S. citizenship.

*Language Barriers.* Similar to what has been reported in the research (e.g., Dettlaff, Vidal de Haymes, Velazquez, Mindell, & Bruce, 2009; Earner, 2007; Segal & Mayadas, 2005), lack of Spanish-speaking social workers both in several field offices and in their communities created language and access barriers. Communication with caregivers often required use of an interpreter. Although not practiced within Casey, there were also instances in the community when children served as interpreters for families. Language barriers also compromised access to needed services, as waitlists for Spanish-speaking providers were often several months long.

*Workforce Development.* Conversations with local child welfare staff surfaced reservations toward placing children abroad due to a lack of information about services and inability to confirm information being provided in home studies conducted by staff in other countries. Families

also reported deference being given to foster families who want to adopt children. In one case of an infant girl with significant medical needs whose great aunt and uncle wanted to adopt her, the hospital social worker reportedly told the CPS worker that they would not “waste resources” providing medical training for a Spanish-speaking family and only provided training for the foster family caring for the child. On top of limited cultural and contextual understanding, turnover of CPS staff requires repeat installation of activities and knowledge, which was especially apparent when dealing with the complexities of transnational cases. This finding is inclusive of barriers reported by parents in the literature, namely lack of knowledge about immigration status on the part of child welfare caseworkers and mutual cultural misunderstanding between families and caseworkers (Earner, 2007).

*Policy.* Policy changes at the state and federal level can directly affect this work, both in the number of families affected, and the ability of the child welfare system to meet their needs. Immigration policy changes made thus far by the Trump Administration may fuel a surge in the number of children who enter foster care, as the new orders make every undocumented person a priority for removal and speed up the deportation process for immigrants with former deportation orders (Immigrant Legal Resource Center, n.d.). The official guidelines for implementing the orders also rolls back previous Department of Homeland Security policy that gave immigration officials discretion in deciding whether to detain certain individuals, including parents and legal guardians of minor children (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2017).

## **Limitations**

The work described in this paper should be considered in light of its limitations. First, the information shared represents seven field offices across five states. Findings indicate that across offices, similarities and differences with regard to program successes and challenges abound. It is unknown whether child welfare agencies implementing similar programming face similar barriers. Future research should investigate

whether the common successes and challenges identified in this study exist more broadly: Specifically, are there regional differences in themes in challenges or do they exist more broadly? Second, findings primarily represent the views of the field office leads at Casey. Although leads collaborated with field office partners, future research could represent a more diverse group of stakeholders, including families and community partners, and examine whether other themes are identified. Third, this study is descriptive and exploratory in nature. Future research that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data and compares experiences across different agencies would strengthen findings. Ultimately, tracking permanency outcomes for these youth and families will lend credence to the practices described here.

## Conclusion

This article highlights one organization's experience working in community-based, transnational collaborations to improve outcomes for children and families who are immigrants. It highlights important themes about the challenges and successes and demonstrates the complicated nature of the work. Further, while contextual factors often influence implementation and should be incorporated into implementation plans, lessons across the seven field offices also point to systemic issues that may be equally as relevant. Successful implementation of an international immigration program depends on a comprehensive, multi-level approach that considers the development of supports both locally and systemically to adequately identify and respond to the needs of children and families who are immigrants.

## References

- Almukhtar, S., Griggs, T., & Yourish, K. (2018, June 20). How Trump's policy change separated migrant children from their parents. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/20/us/border-children-separation.html>

- Blase, K., Van Dyke, M., & Fixsen, D. (2013). Stages of implementation analysis: Where are we. *Chapel Hill: National Implementation Research Network*.
- Capps, R., Koball, H., Bachmeier, J. D., Ruiz Soto, A. G., Zong, J., & Gelatt, J. (2016). *Deferred Action for Unauthorized Immigrant Parents: Analysis of DAPA's potential effects on families and children*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute and Urban Institute.
- Dettlaff, A. J., Vidal de Haymes, M., Velazquez, S., Mindell, R., & Bruce, L. (2009). Emerging issues at the intersection of immigration and child welfare: Results from a transnational research and policy forum. *Child Welfare, 88*(2), 47–67.
- Dettlaff, A. J., & Earner, I. (2012). Children of immigrants in the child welfare system: Characteristics, risk, and maltreatment. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 93*(4), 295–303.
- Dettlaff, A. J., & O'Grady, C. (2014, December). *Memoranda of understanding with foreign consulates*. Las Cruces, NM: Center on Immigration and Child Welfare, New Mexico State University. Retrieved from [http://cimmcw.org/wp-content/uploads/CICW\\_MOUs-with-Foreign-Consulates.pdf](http://cimmcw.org/wp-content/uploads/CICW_MOUs-with-Foreign-Consulates.pdf)
- Dettlaff, A. J., & O'Grady, C. (2015, January). *Placement of children with parents or relatives in a foreign country*. Las Cruces, NM: Center on Immigration and Child Welfare, New Mexico State University. Retrieved from [http://cimmcw.org/wp-content/uploads/CICW\\_Placement-of-Children-in-Foreign-Country.pdf](http://cimmcw.org/wp-content/uploads/CICW_Placement-of-Children-in-Foreign-Country.pdf)
- Dickerson, C. (2018, April 20). Hundreds of immigrant children have been taken from parents at the U.S. border. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/20/us/immigrant-children-separation-ice.html>
- Dreby, J. (2012). *How today's immigration enforcement policies impact children, families, and communities*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.
- Earner, I. (2007). Immigrant families and public child welfare: Barriers to services and approaches for change. *Child Welfare, 86*(4), 63–91.
- Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, H.R. 253, 115th Cong. (2018).
- Fixsen, D. L., Blasé, K. A., Metz, A., & Van Dyke, M. (2013). Statewide implementation of evidence-based programs. *Exceptional Children, 79*, 213–230.
- Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network. (FMHI Publication No. 231).
- Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, H.R. 6893, 110th Cong. (2008).

- Immigrant Legal Resource Center. (n.d.). *Immigration enforcement and the child welfare system*. San Francisco, CA: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.ilrc.org/sites/default/files/resources/immigration-childwelfare-report.pdf>
- Jordan, M., & Dickerson, C. (2018, July 24). More than 450 migrant parents may have been deported without their children. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/24/us/migrant-parents-deported-children.html>
- Maiter, S., Stalker, C. A., & Alaggia, R. (2009). The experiences of minority immigrant families receiving child welfare services: Seeking to understand how to reduce risk and increase protective factors. *Social Work Faculty Publications*, 2, 28–36.
- Mathema, S. (2017, March 16). *Keeping families together: Why all Americans should care about what happens to unauthorized immigrants*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2017/03/16/428335/keeping-families-together/>
- Metz, A., & Bartley, L. (2012). Active implementation frameworks for program success: How to use implementation science to improve outcomes for children. *Zero to Three Journal*, 32(4), 11–18.
- National Implementation Research Network. (2017). *Implementation Stages*. Chapel Hill, NC: FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Retrieved from <http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/learn-implementation/implementation-stages>
- Segal, U., & Mayadas, N. (2005). Assessment of issues facing immigrant and refugee families. *Child Welfare*, 84, 563–583.
- Southern Arizona Transnational Task Force. (2018). Tucson, AZ: Author. *Separated and transnational families: A toolkit for child welfare cases – Judges, attorneys and child welfare personnel*.
- Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. (2018). *International and immigration issues resource guide*. Austin, TX: Author. Retrieved from [https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/Resource\\_Guides/International\\_and\\_Immigration\\_Issues\\_Resource\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/Resource_Guides/International_and_Immigration_Issues_Resource_Guide.pdf)
- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (2017). Detention and removal of alien parents or legal guardians. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.ice.gov/parental-interest>
- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2017). *Fiscal year 2017 ICE enforcement and removal operations report*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report/2017/iceEndOfYearFY2017.pdf>

Velazquez, S. C., & Dettlaff, A. J. (2011). Immigrant children and child welfare in the United States: Demographics, legislation, research, policy, and practice impacting public services. *Child Indicators Research, 4*, 679–695.

Wessler, S.F. (2011). *Shattered families: The perilous intersection of immigration enforcement and the child welfare system*. New York: Applied Research Center.

Zero-Tolerance for Offenses Under 8 U.S.C. § 1325(a). (2018, April 6). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1049751/download>