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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colorado Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel (ORPC): Interdisciplinary Team Representation

Phase I Evaluation Findings

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What is Interdisciplinary Representation?

An interdisciplinary team model pairs an attorney with a social worker or a parent advocate who has lived experience. Drawing on the unique strengths of each member, they work as a cohesive team of parent defenders to support families involved in dependency and neglect cases and protect the fundamental right to parent. The team may also seek support from experts and investigators.

ORPC's Commitment to Evidence-Based Decision-Making

The Colorado Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel (ORPC) is committed to data-driven decision-making and smart state investments. To continuously strengthen their work to protect the fundamental right to parent, the ORPC partnered with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) to build evidence for the interdisciplinary team model of parent representation. Together, the ORPC and the Colorado Lab are moving the model through the [Steps to Building Evidence](#) using a phased study approach to explore model foundations (Phase I) and outcomes (Phases II and III). The ORPC is using information generated through the evidence-building process to (a) guide strategic learning and continuous quality improvement; and (b) learn how investment in this model can improve family reunification, promote parental dignity, and reduce long-term fiscal and societal costs of systems involvement.



OFFICE OF RESPONDENT
PARENTS' COUNSEL
Protecting the Fundamental Right to Parent



Study Background

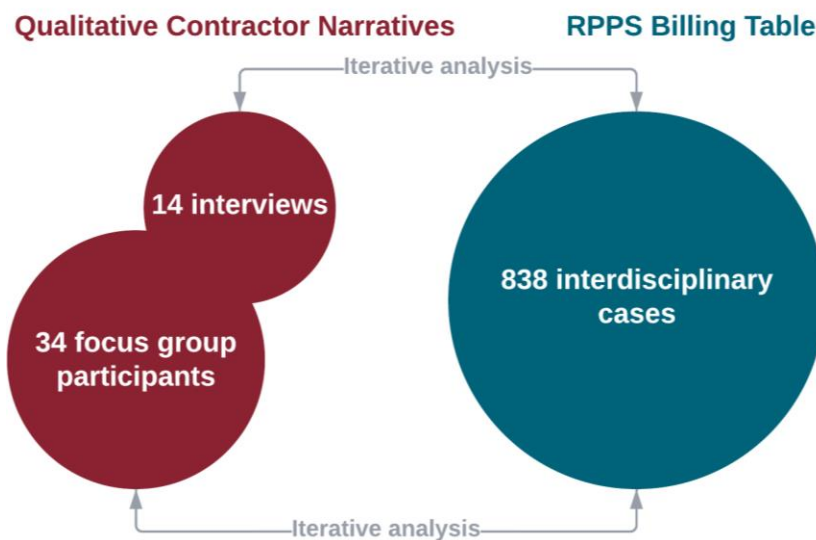
Phase I focused on Steps 1 and 2 of evidence-building—program design and identify outputs. This was accomplished by defining essential elements of the model, identifying case and client characteristics that can most benefit from the model, and developing concrete guidance for strengths-based staffing of the interdisciplinary team.

A “numbers and narratives” mixed methods approach was used, leveraging administrative data from the ORPC Respondent Parent Payment System (RPPS) as well as narratives from ORPC attorney, social worker, and parent advocate contractors.

“I couldn’t be more impressed with the ability that everybody [on the team] had to wrap around this mom and this family and make it work...And now she has a healthy relationship with herself, with the dad, with her kid, and we had an amazing outcome.”

- Social Worker

Primary and secondary data sources leveraged in Phase I



Results lay the foundation for Phase II, which will use linked data from Colorado’s child welfare system (Trails) and the ORPC’s billing system (RPPS) to examine impact of the model on client, case, and system-level outcomes. There will be a special emphasis on understanding equitable achievement of outcomes and cross-system return on investment. Phase II work is taking place in State Fiscal Year 2023.

Understanding Complex Case Needs

The ORPC provides legal representation for indigent parents involved in child welfare proceedings. Parent representation models are a best practice for driving positive outcomes in reunification, out-of-home-placement, child safety, and parental well-being. An interdisciplinary team model can promote these outcomes for families with complex case needs.



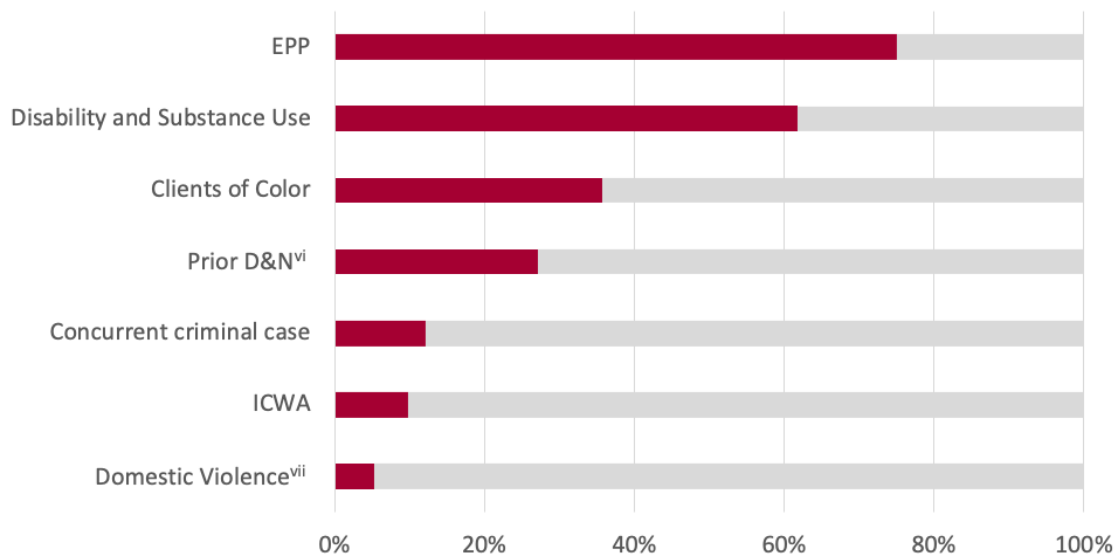
There are a variety of social and legal factors that can make a case more complex and act as barriers to the shared goal of strengthening the family and keeping kids safely in the home. The factors displayed in the figure below are key examples of complex case needs that are captured in the ORPC billing system.

Complex case needs can be more effectively met when:

- Families receive structural and social supports to address root causes of child welfare involvement and promote long-term well-being.
- Parental voice is centered at every step of the process and dignity is upheld.
- Parents build confidence and skills for long-term caregiving success.
- Child safety and mitigating trauma is promoted during case strategy.

Such complex case needs require wraparound support, which a team approach can best accomplish.

Leading legal and social complexities in interdisciplinary cases



“A lot of the time clients have mental health challenges, or they don’t have their basic needs met. Things like that are barriers to completing their treatment plan.”

- Social Worker

“I really can say ‘I understand what you’re going through. It is scary you know?’... I feel that upfront is where I’ve had the best luck, making a connection and creating trust”

- Parent Advocate



Precision Staffing to Meet Complex Case Needs

At baseline,ⁱ 11.5% of all ORPC cases used the interdisciplinary team model to meet complex case needs.

Ensuring attorneys have access to social workers and parent advocates whenever it meets parent needs is critical to equitably achieving positive outcomes across the state. As such, additional investment in this model is needed to grow its use and maximize value of the team approach.

“Each case is unique and calls for different things. I work with social workers or parent advocates to meet those individual case needs. And I know that I’m a better lawyer because of the team.”

- Respondent Parent Counsel

Here is a data-informed roadmap on staffing guidance for attorneys as they activate the interdisciplinary team.

Making Findings Actionable – Using Resources Wisely

The ORPC is leveraging findings to right-size use of the interdisciplinary team, strategically matching requests for social workers or parents advocates to client needs and characteristics. In doing so, precision use of the model is expected to grow as the team is staffed for the right reason, at the right time, with the right contractor type.

How Interdisciplinary Teams Drive Positive Outcomes

Attorneys, social workers, and parent advocates bring different specialized skillsets, experiences, and lens that, together, can better meet the complex needs of families and drive positive case outcomes. Findings identified three interrelated activities that the team invests in when wrapping around a family



ⁱ Baseline was defined in this study as cases that closed during 2019 or June through November of 2021 (n = 7,272).



With the addition of a social worker or parent advocate, **building a client-centered team, advocating for the client in and out of court, and supporting the client in addressing their needs** can be done with more depth, intentionality, and efficiency.

All team members contribute to each activity. The statistics below illustrate **how the team typically invests their time**, as a whole team. We also call out where **each team members strengths** are in relationship to these activities.

“They [social workers, parent advocates] answer their phone at 2am for a client who is on the verge of relapse. I can’t do that. I don’t have that training. That’s why you need an interdisciplinary team.”

- Respondent Parent Counsel

- **32% of team time is invested in building a client-centered team:** create a cohesive legal strategy, coordinate and communicate within the team, build a relationship with the client and between client and team, understand client needs, hopes, and goals. More of **Parent Advocates’** time is typically invested in this area than other team members.
- **23% of team time is invested in supporting the client in addressing their needs:** promote a meaningful treatment plan, connect the client with structural supports and services, facilitate communication among case actors, attend family meetings. More of **Social Workers’** time is typically invested in this area than other team members.
- **29% of team time is invested in advocating for the client in and out of court:** hold state actors accountable, ensure appropriate fact findings, provide hearing representation and preparation. More of **Attorneys’** time is dedicated to advocacy than other team members.

Making Findings Actionable – Improving Value and Reducing Burnout

The ORPC is using findings to provide data-informed training to contractors on how best to use each member of the team, including leveraging different strengths of members, communication and coordination strategies, and clearly defining roles and responsibilities. In doing so, the model can be further improved and contractors better buffered from the effects of burnout as the team acts as not only a support to clients, but to the attorneys themselves.

Better Together

The 2022 ORPC Conference theme was “Better Together.” The Phase I evaluation exemplifies how for complex cases, parent defense is better when attorneys work together with social workers and parent advocates.

Together, they provide parents the support they need for success in the case and in life.

“I find them [social workers, parent advocates] invaluable. I cannot get everything done that they do to contribute to the team. I really look at it as a great partnership.”

- Respondent Parent Counsel