



Building Evidence for the Interdisciplinary Model of Legal Representation: Methods and Findings Behind the Story Walk

Background: The [Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel](#) (ORPC) is committed to evidence-based policy and practice. Since 2020, the ORPC has partnered with the [Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab](#) (Colorado Lab) to rigorously build evidence for the interdisciplinary (IDT) team model of parent representation. **This document provides the methods and findings behind research insights communicated through the Story Walk exhibition on ORPC legal representation.**

Methods Summary: The [Linked Information Network of Colorado](#) (LINC) was used to connect legal representation data from the ORPC to Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) child welfare case information over a 4-year period. LINC is a collaborative effort of the Colorado Lab and the Governor's Office of Information Technology that securely connects and anonymizes data across state systems. Both partners approved the request. The final match rate was 83.1%.

Data Sources used for linking (referred to herein as the "linked dataset"):

- Legal representation data from the ORPC's Respondent Parent Payment System (RPPS).
- Child welfare outcome data and client characteristics from CDHS's Trails system.

Prior research on the IDT model identified a variety of [social and legal factors](#) that make a case more complex, [commonly group together](#), and act as barriers to family strengthening.^{1, 2} Informed by this research, the current analytic approach compared outcomes of the attorney-only model to the IDT model for the full sample and for cases with leading dual complexities.

Defining the Sample: The goal of this study was to understand the effects of interdisciplinary representation on child welfare outcomes. As such, the analytic approach was to attribute a child welfare case to either the IDT model or the attorney-only model for child welfare cases that closed between January 1, 2021, through March 6, 2025. Analysis was anchored to a unique case.

- A unique child welfare case was assigned to the [attorney-only group](#) if:
 - the case had one respondent parent, and they received the attorney-only model; or
 - the case had two or more respondent parents, and all had the attorney-only model.
- A unique child welfare case was assigned to the [interdisciplinary group](#) if:
 - the case had one respondent parent, and they received the IDT model; or
 - the case had two or more respondent parents, and at least one had the IDT model.

IDT model: Social worker or parent advocate added to the parent defense team at any time.

Final Analytic Sample: The final analytic sample was 6,028 unique child welfare cases (n = 2,972 IDT; n = 3,056 attorney-only). There were 10,129 unique respondent parents and 11,775 children.



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Office-level Reach Metrics

Research Question: What are the leading successes of the Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel to date?

Data Source: Data points on reach of the ORPC, since inception in 2016, were descriptively analyzed using the Respondent Parent Payment System (RPPS).

Findings: Since 2016, the Office has achieved:

- 28,528 parents represented
- 18,198 families served
- 16,921 parents reunified
- 1,320 training hours provided
- 10,000 counted in trained attendance
- 830 court observations of attorney appearances

Contextual information provided on the training and oversight storyboard is from the 2007 report, [*Respondent Parents' Counsel Task Force Statewide Needs Assessment*](#),³ conducted by the National Center for State Courts.

Preventive Legal Services

Research Question: What client needs does the preventive legal services program address?

Data Source: Data on preventive legal services were descriptively analyzed using the RPPS.

Findings: The pilot has reached 61 parents since launch across nine counties (Larimer, Weld, Morgan, Denver, Adams, Arapahoe, Jefferson, Mesa, Delta). Figure 1 shows the number of eligible referrals by year. Figure 2 shows referral reasons to the program since pilot launch (2021 through June 2025).

Figure 1. Number of Eligible Referrals to the Preventive Legal Services Program, by year

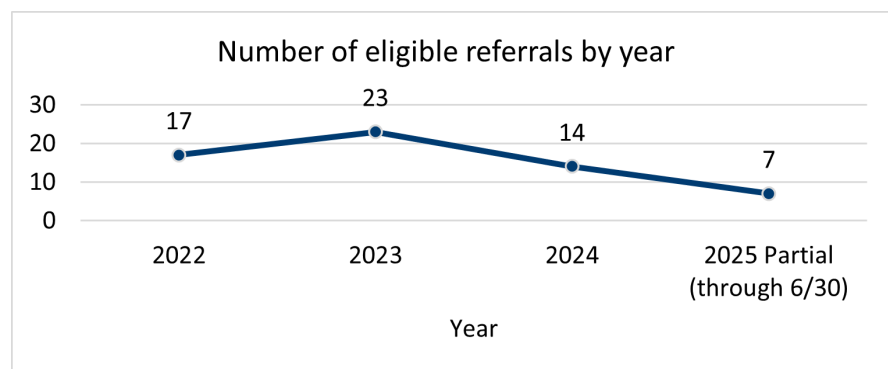
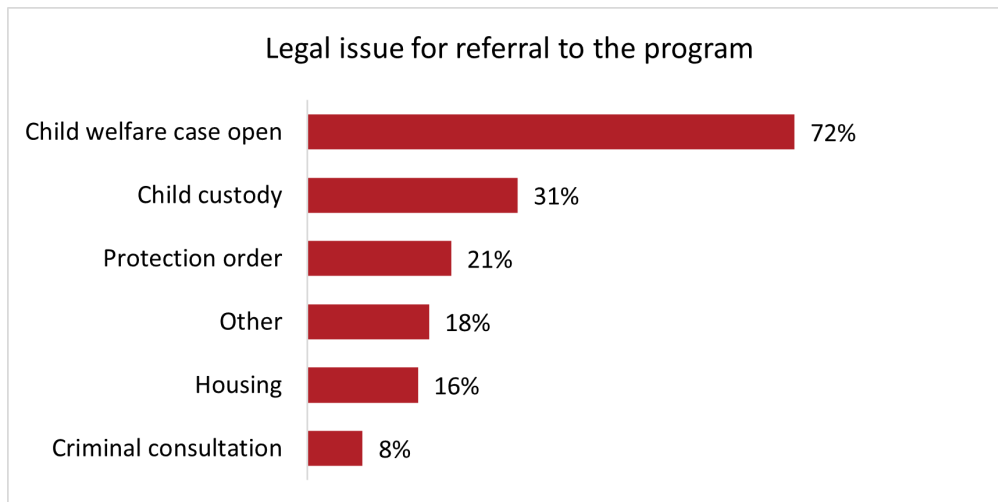


Figure 2. Reasons for Referral to the Preventive Legal Services Program, 2021 to June 2025



Note: “Other” includes issues such as child guardianship and assistance navigating services.

Interdisciplinary Team Activities

Research Question: What do interdisciplinary (IDT) teams do?

Data Source: Data on activities of IDT teams were descriptively analyzed using billing categories from the RPPS. [Previous research](#)⁴ showed that IDT teams invest in three interrelated activities to wrap support around a family during a dependency and neglect case: 1) Build a client-centered team; 2) Advocate for the client in and out of court; and 3) Support the client in addressing their needs. How IDT team members spend their time on each activity differs by contractor role (Respondent Parent Counsel, Respondent Parent Social Worker, Parent Advocate). Informed by this prior research, the amount of time billed in each activity was analyzed for ORPC appointment dates from January 1, 2019, to March 3, 2025. Leading billing categories in each activity of the team are identified in Table 1.

Table 1. Leading Billing Categories in Each Major Activity of the Interdisciplinary Team

Build a Client-Centered Team	Advocate for the Client	Support the Client in Addressing their Needs	Other
Client communication (phone call, text, email)	Hearing preparation	Family engagement meeting	Travel time
Meeting with client	Draft pleadings and motions	Review hearing	Notes to file
Communication among team members	Review client file	Communication with department caseworker	Research

Note: Categories listed are not exhaustive of all billing codes included in activity analysis.

Findings: The amount of time the IDT team spends, collectively, by activity is shown in Table 2. The amount of time each team member spends, individually, by activity is shown in Table 3. Parent advocates and social workers spend the most time engaging with the client and communicating with the parent defense team, while attorneys spend the most time advocating for the client in and out of court.

Table 2. Percentage of Time Interdisciplinary Teams Spend, collectively, by activity

Activity	Percent of Time
Build a Client-Centered Team	29%
Advocate for the Client	33%
Support the Client in Addressing their Needs	25%
Other	13%

Table 3. Percentage of Time Each Team Member Spends, individually, by activity

Activity	Attorney	Social Worker	Parent Advocate
Build a Client-Centered Team	21%	40%	51%
Advocate for the Client	46%	13%	11%
Support the Client in Addressing their Needs	25%	27%	18%
Other	8%	20%	20%

Interdisciplinary Representation Reach and Growth

Research Question: What is the reach of the IDT model and how has this changed over time?

Data Sources: First, we examined the geographic reach of ORPC representation, by representation type and by judicial district, from January 1, 2025, through March 6, 2025 (n = 6,986 parents across all 23 judicial districts) (Figure 3). Data for this analysis come from the RPPS. Child welfare case volume comes from the [Child Welfare Training System County Size Map](#). The goal of the analysis was to identify reach and current availability of ORPC representation models.

Second, we examined geographic distribution of the linked dataset used for outcomes reporting. All child welfare cases that met criteria¹ for analysis, closed between January 1, 2021, and March 6, 2025, and had ORPC representation (n = 6,028) were included. The percent of the sample from

¹ To be included in the analysis, the child welfare case must have a unique Trails ID, a unique case involvement ID, ORPC representation appointed while the case was open, and a valid case close date

each judicial district was then analyzed and plotted (Figure 4) using 5% gradients. Table 4 provides the detailed distribution of the sample by judicial district.

Third, we examined trends in ORPC representation model type for closed child welfare cases from 2022 through 2024 in the linked dataset (n = 4,569) (Table 5).

Findings: Geographic reach of ORPC representation, geographic distribution of the linked dataset, and trends in ORPC representation for the linked dataset are reported below.

Figure 3. Geographic Reach of ORPC Representation, January 1, 2025 through March 6, 2025

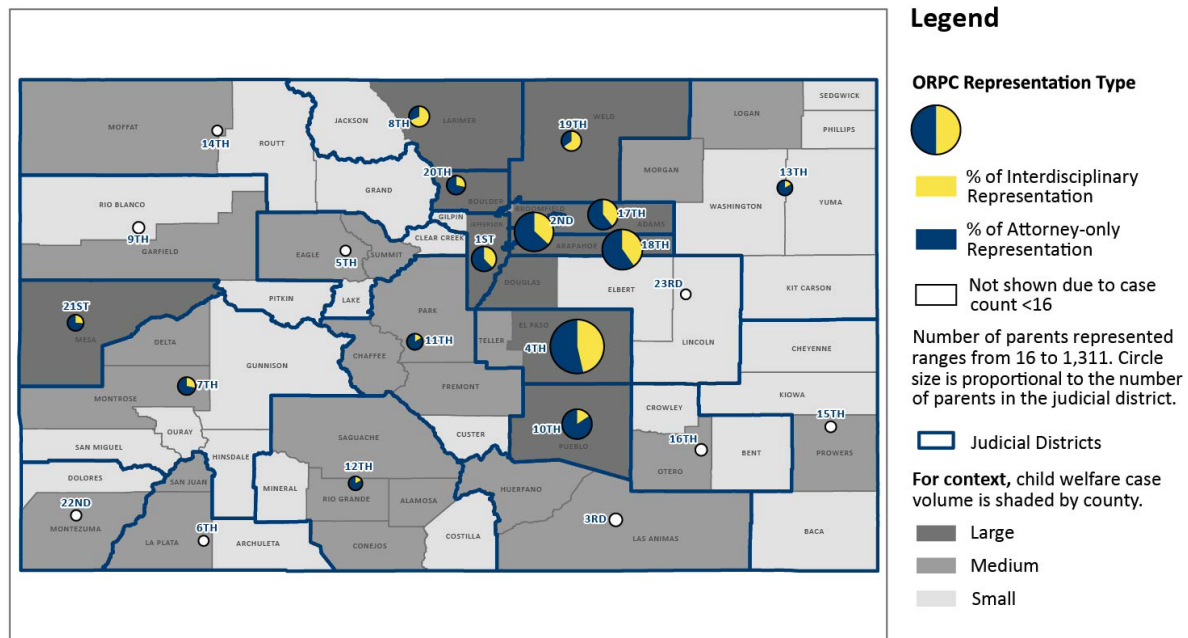


Figure 4. Distribution of the Linked Analytic Sample of Closed Child Welfare Cases with ORPC Representation, January 1, 2021 through March 6, 2025

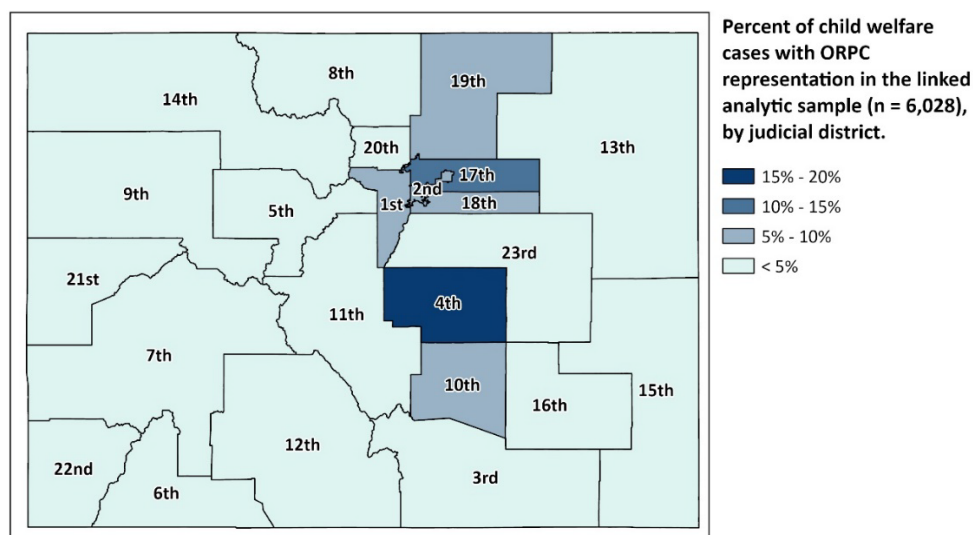


Table 4. Distribution of the Linked Analytic Sample of Closed Child Welfare Cases with ORPC Representation, January 1, 2021 through March 6, 2025, by judicial district

Judicial District	Number of Child Welfare Cases	Percent
1	419	7.0%
2	563	9.3%
3	72	1.2%
4	1,168	19.4%
5	29	0.5%
6	20	0.3%
7	155	2.6%
8	278	4.6%
9	47	0.8%
10	351	5.8%
11	161	2.7%
12	148	2.5%
13	188	3.1%
14	30	0.5%
15	31	0.5%
16	61	1.0%
17	828	13.7%
18	440	7.3%
19	448	7.4%
20	235	3.9%
21	174	2.9%
22	39	0.6%
23	143	2.4%
Total	6,028	100.0%

Table 5. Percentage of Child Welfare Cases Served by ORPC Representation Model, by year

Year (# of closed child welfare cases)	Attorney-only	Interdisciplinary
2022 (1,586 cases)	55.86%	44.14%
2023 (1,545 cases)	48.22%	51.78%
2024 (1,438 cases)	44.51%	55.49%

Case Complexities

Research Question: Who do IDT teams serve?

Data Source: Data on social and legal factors on cases served by the ORPC come from the linked dataset. Social and legal case factors were chosen for analysis based on [prior research](#)⁵ on the interdisciplinary model. Within-group, two-tailed t-tests were used to determine if case complexities differed between representation model.

Findings: Interdisciplinary teams serve cases with significantly higher rates of every case complexity analyzed, as illustrated in Table 6 ($p < .01$).

Table 6. Complex Social and Legal Factors on Closed Child Welfare Cases in the Linked Dataset, by representation model

	Attorney-only		Interdisciplinary		Total		P-value
	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Parental substance use	2,247	74%	2,458	83%	4,705	78%	<0.01
Expedited permanency planning	1,903	62%	2,163	73%	4,066	67%	<0.01
Homelessness	842	28%	1,015	34%	1,857	31%	<0.01
Prior child welfare involvement	1,473	48%	1,554	52%	3,027	50%	<0.01
Youth Beyond Control of Parent	391	13%	223	8%	614	10%	<0.01
Parent of color	1,582	52%	1,680	57%	3,262	54%	<0.01
Parent with a disability	1,607	53%	1,963	66%	3,570	59%	<0.01
Total	3,056	51%	2,972	49%	6,028	100%	

Indigent parents involved in child welfare commonly face multiple case complexities that group together on a case to create additional and interrelated challenges. IDT teams serve cases with significantly more complexities, as illustrated in Table 7 ($p < .01$).

Table 7. Percentage of Closed Child Welfare Cases in the Linked Dataset, by number of case complexities and representation model

Representation Model	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Attorney-only	2%	8%	20%	25%	24%	16%	5%	0%
Interdisciplinary	1%	5%	12%	23%	29%	22%	8%	0%

The Value of Interdisciplinary Teams for Keeping Families Together

Two key outcomes were examined to understand the role interdisciplinary representation plays in improving child welfare outcomes and reducing family separation: 1) family preservation outcomes *during a case*, and 2) permanency outcomes at *case closure*.

Detailed results for each are presented below. Family preservation and permanency outcomes illustrate that interdisciplinary teams serve as a leveling-up factor for parents with more complex cases. Child removal rates, use of kinship care, and reunification rates were similar between attorney-only and interdisciplinary representation models. However, IDT teams represent parents with greater case complexities, including families with greater child welfare involvement and substance use issues. IDT teams are also serving more parents of color and more parents with disabilities, who can face systemic bias in the system.

Thus, the on-par outcomes show how IDT teams are closing the gap for parents with complex case needs. Without investment in interdisciplinary representation, more Colorado families would remain separated and not achieve reunification.

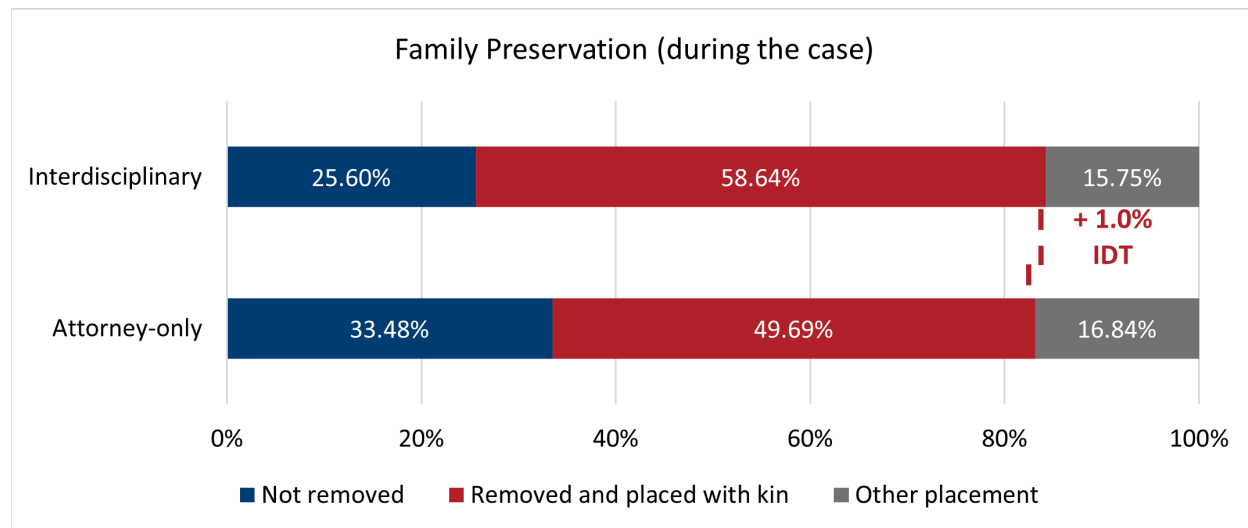
Family Preservation Outcomes, During a Case

Research Question: What family preservation outcomes are associated with interdisciplinary representation during a child welfare case?

Data Source: Data on family preservation outcomes (out-of-home removals, placements) for cases served with ORPC representation come from the linked dataset. Family preservation is defined as a combination of children who remained at home for the entirety of a child welfare case; children who were removed from the home during a case and placed with kin; and children who were removed from the home during a case and had another placement type (e.g., non-kinship foster care, congregate care). Analysis is at the child level. Within-group, two-tailed t-tests were used to determine if outcomes differed between representation model, for the whole sample and for a sub-sample of cases with dual complexities present.

Findings (full sample): For parents receiving interdisciplinary representation, 84.2% of children were never removed or if removed, were placed with kin (attorney-only: 83.2%) (Figure 5). This difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.1176$). For both models, ensuring that over 80% of children are never removed or are able to be with kin if removed is a strong outcome that illustrates ORPC's meaningful impact for Colorado families.

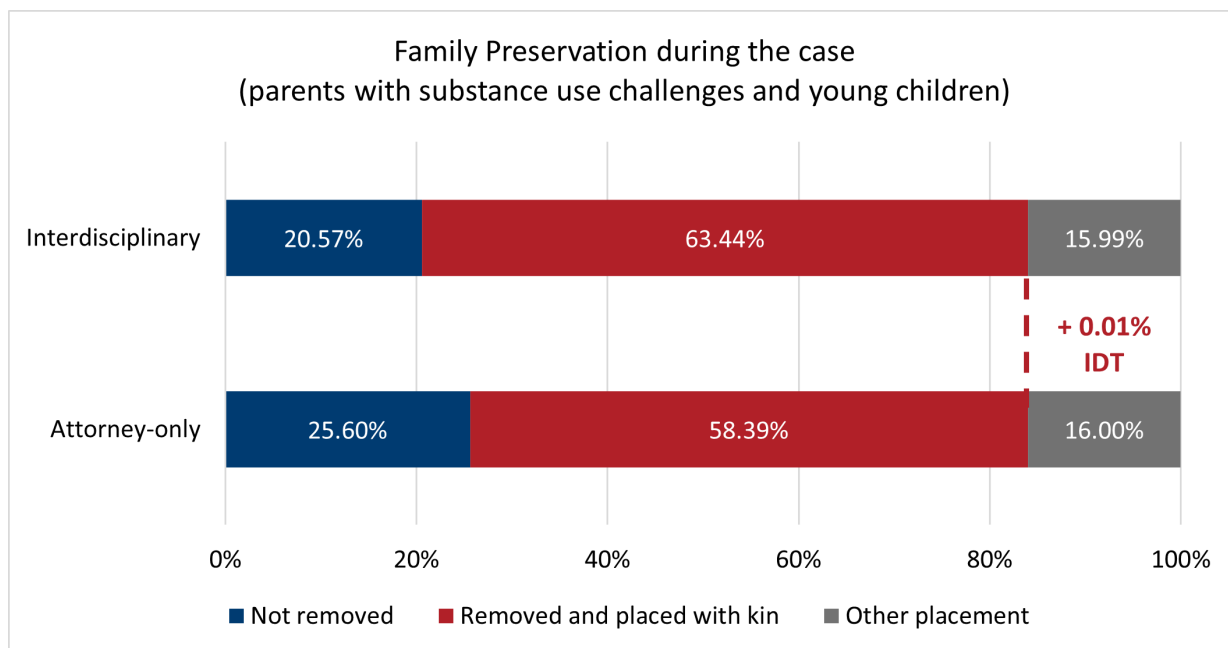
Figure 5. Removals and Placements for Children of Parents with ORPC Representation in the Linked Dataset, by representation model



Notes: $n = 5,726$ children in the attorney-only group; $n = 6,062$ in the interdisciplinary group. Other placement includes foster care – child placing agency (CPA) or county certified, trial home visit, residential, hospital/psychiatric, runaway, group, detention, and independent living.

Findings for select case complexities: Among the interdisciplinary group, for parents facing substance use challenges and with an expedited permanency planning (EPP) case (children under 6 years of age), 84% of children were never removed or if removed, were placed with kin (compared to 83.2% for attorney-only) (Figure 6). This difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.9875$). Findings for this dual complexity group show how favorable outcomes in family preservation are maintained even with added challenges—and the importance of family preservation in shaping well-being during early childhood.

Figure 6. Removals and Placements for Children of Parents with ORPC Representation in the Linked Dataset, by representation model, when parental substance use and EPP is present



Notes: n = 2,937 children in the attorney-only group; n = 3,884 in the interdisciplinary group. Other placement includes foster care – CPA or county certified, trial home visit, residential, hospital/psychiatric, runaway, group, detention, and independent living.

National metrics provided on the storyboard for comparisons of kinship placement come from the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#),⁶ via 2023 data (most recent available) of the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

Findings on use of kinship care when removals occur: IDT teams excel in helping families use kinship care when removals from the home are necessary; all results are statistically significant.

- 78.9% of children whose parents received interdisciplinary representation had at least one placement with kin (attorney-only: 74.8%; $p < 0.01$).
- Children whose parents received interdisciplinary representation spent 63.2% of time with kin during out-of-home placement (attorney-only: 60.5%; $p < 0.01$).
- For cases involving parental substance use, 80.5% of children had at least one placement with kin (attorney-only: 78.1%; $p < 0.02$).
- For EPP cases, 78.8% of children had at least one placement with kin (attorney-only: 76.3%; $p < 0.05$).

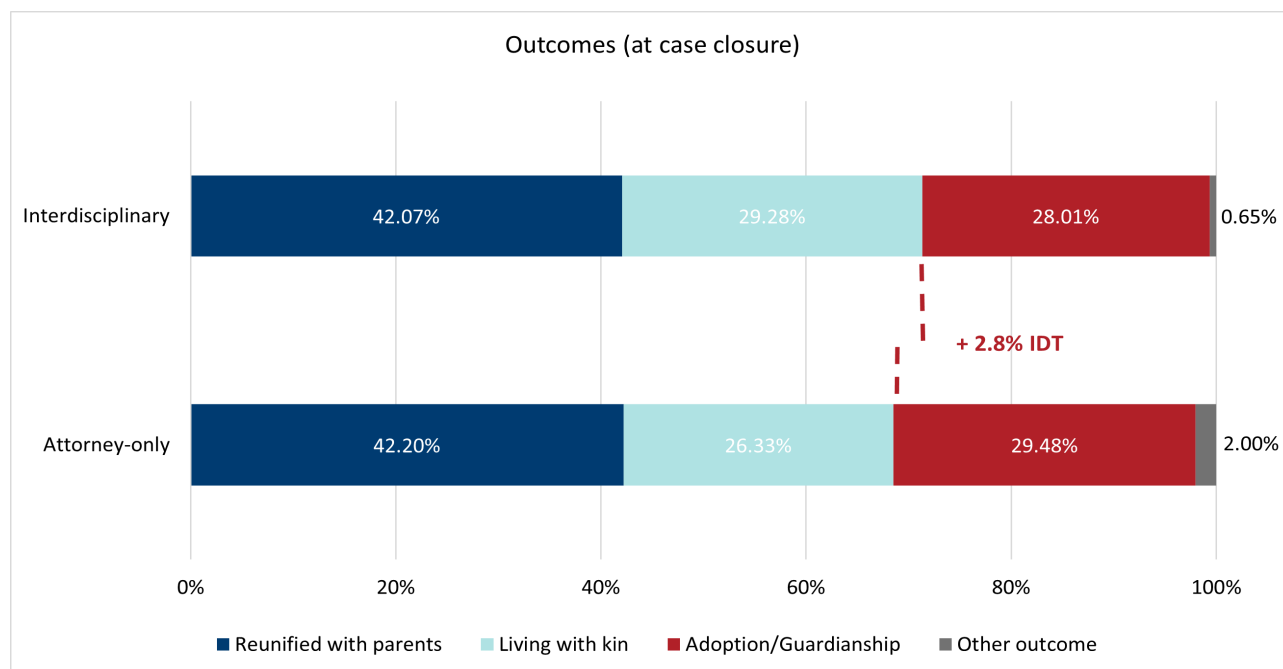
Permanency Outcomes, at Case Closure

Research Question: What permanency outcomes are associated with interdisciplinary representation at the end of the child welfare case?

Data Source: Data on permanency outcomes (reunification with parents, living with kin permanently, adoption/guardianship, or other outcome) for cases with ORPC representation come from the linked dataset. Analysis is done at the child level and is only for the sub-set of children who are removed from the home during a case. Within-group, two-tailed t-tests were used to determine if outcomes differed between representation model, for the whole sample and for a sub-sample of cases with dual complexities present.

Findings (full sample): For parents receiving interdisciplinary representation, 71.3% of children were reunified with their parents or living with kin at case closure (attorney-only: 68.5%) (Figure 7). This difference is statistically significant ($p = <0.02$).

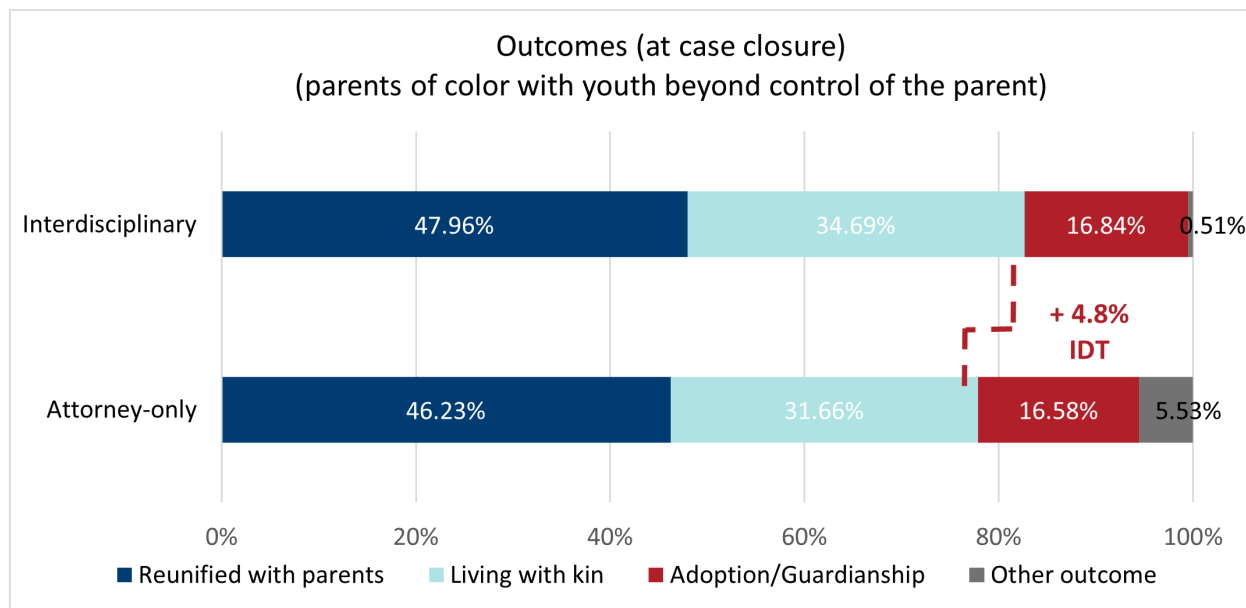
Figure 7. Permanency and Other Outcomes at Case Closure for Children of Parents with ORPC Representation in the Linked Dataset, by representation model



Notes: $n = 3,107$ children in the attorney-only group; $n = 3,706$ in the interdisciplinary group. Other placement includes transferred to another agency, disrupted pre-legal adoption, adult developmental disabilities system, Division of Youth Corrections discharge, post-commit parole, state or tribal Title IV-E agency, Indian tribe or trivial agency (non-IV-E), other public agency, transfer to foster youth in transition program, and juvenile justice agency.

Findings for select case complexities: Among the interdisciplinary group, for parents of color with a youth involved due to “beyond control of parent,” 82.7% of youth reunified with their parents or stayed permanently with kin (compared to 77.9% for attorney-only) (Figure 8). This difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.2879$). This finding shows how ORPC representation can help parents regain control in the home and stabilize youth and as a result, help mitigate negative lifelong outcomes (e.g., homelessness) associated with older youth who age out of the system.

Figure 8. Permanency and Other Outcomes at Case Closure for Children of Parents with ORPC Representation in the Linked Dataset, by representation model and when parent of color and youth “beyond control of parent”



Notes: n = 199 youth in the attorney-only group; n = 196 in the interdisciplinary group. Other placement includes transfer to foster youth in transition program, transferred to another agency, adult developmental disabilities system, Division of Youth Corrections discharge, post-commit parole, Indian tribe or trivial agency (non-IV-E), other public agency, and juvenile justice agency.

National metrics provided on the storyboard for comparisons of permanency rates come from the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), via 2023 data (most recent available) of the AFCARS.

Narrative Data

Research Question: What do ORPC contractors and clients see as the value of the interdisciplinary representation model?

Data Source: Evidence building for the ORPC uses a mixed methods approach, combining numbers-based data with narratives to create a more holistic understanding of reach, experience, and outcomes. Narrative data showcased in the Story Walk come from three sources:

- Narrative findings from previous qualitative research by the Colorado Lab.
- Narrative findings from recent (2022, 2023, and 2024) ORPC contractor surveys.
- Narrative quotes from ORPC contractors, staff, clients, and system partners as elicited throughout events and activities of the Office since inception.

Findings: Findings report from the previous qualitative research conducted by the Colorado Lab is [here](#). Quotes and themes obtained from other sources are integrated on the Story Walk directly.

Endnotes

- ¹ Everson, C.L., Clemens, E.V., & Belcher, C. (June 2022). *Colorado Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel (ORPC) interdisciplinary team representation: Phase I evaluation findings* (Report No. 20-06B). Denver, CO: Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver.
- ² Everson, C.L., Clemens, E.V., & Belcher, C. (December 2023). *Child welfare case outcomes of ORPC representation* (Report No. 20-06E). Denver, CO: Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver.
- ³ National Center for State Courts. (2007). *Respondent Parents' Counsel task force statewide needs assessment: Final report*. <https://ncifcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Colorado-CIP-Respondent-Parents-Counsel-Task-Force-Statewide-Needs-Assessment.pdf>
- ⁴ Everson, C.L., Clemens, E.V., & Belcher, C. (June 2022). *Colorado Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel (ORPC) interdisciplinary team representation: Phase I evaluation findings* (Report No. 20-06B). Denver, CO: Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver.
- ⁵ Everson, C.L., Clemens, E.V., & Belcher, C. (December 2023). *Child welfare case outcomes of ORPC representation*. (Report No. 20-06E). Denver, CO: Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver.
- ⁶ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2025). *Children in foster care by placement type in United States, 2023* [Data set]. <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/line/6247-children-in-foster-care-by-placement-type?loc=1&loct=1#1/1/false/2545/asc/2621/12995>