



Evidence Synthesis: Colorado's Interdisciplinary Model of Parent Legal Representation

Policy Brief

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- The Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel (ORPC) serves indigent parents involved in dependency and neglect cases with legal representation.
- The interdisciplinary (IDT) model is a nationally recognized approach to drive positive outcomes. The model pairs an attorney with a social worker or parent advocate with lived experience.
- The ORPC partnered with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab to rigorously build evidence for the IDT model.
- This policy brief synthesizes the research showing the effectiveness of the IDT model for family preservation, kinship care, and permanency.
- Scaling and sustaining this evidence-based model is an essential strategy to improve juvenile courts system practices and strengthen families across generations.

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Report Number: 20-06G. Date: March 2026.

Executive Summary

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](#) to rigorously build evidence for the interdisciplinary (IDT) model of parent representation. The IDT model pairs an attorney with a social worker or parent advocate with lived experience. Through a multi-year research initiative, we moved the IDT model through [Colorado's Steps to Building Evidence](#). The most recent analysis examined outcomes of the IDT model in family preservation, kinship care, and permanency over a 4-year period. **This policy brief shares findings from the 4-year outcomes analysis and places results within previous research on the model.**

Methods: The [Linked Information Network of Colorado](#) (LINC) was used to connect legal representation data from the ORPC to Colorado Department of Human Services' child welfare case information. The analytic approach compared outcomes of the attorney-only model to the IDT model for child welfare cases that closed between January 1, 2021, and March 6, 2025.

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.

Findings: Interdisciplinary teams invest in three interrelated activities to wrap support around families during a dependency and neglect case, spending their time on: a) Building a client centered-team (29%), b) Advocating for the client in and out of court (33%), and c) Supporting the client in addressing their needs (25%).

Key evidence insights comparing the IDT model to the attorney-only model include:

Evidence Insight 1

Interdisciplinary teams **serve cases with significantly higher rates of case complexities** such as parental substance use and homelessness, as well as more families facing injustice in the court and child welfare systems as a parent of color or parenting with a disability (Table ES1).

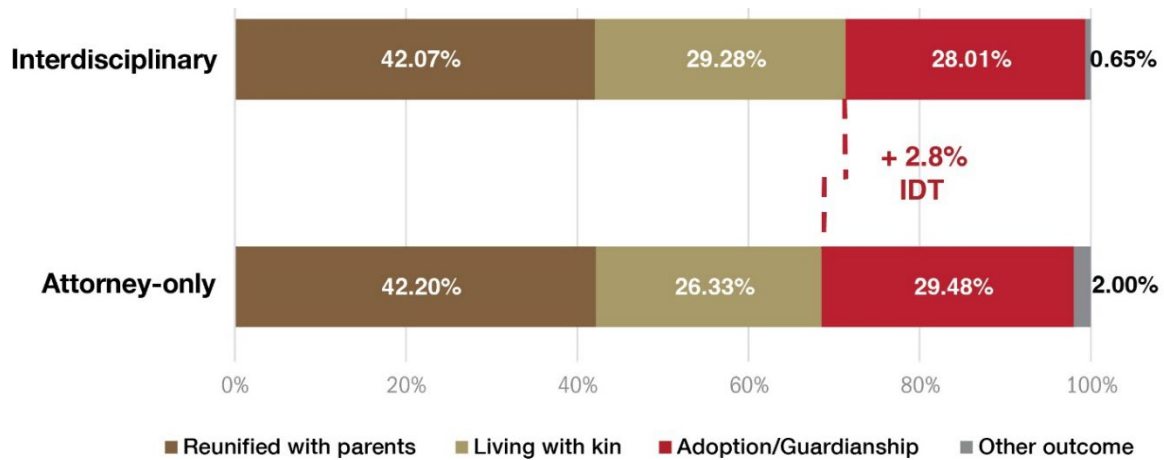
Table ES1. Comparison of Complex Case Factors, by model

	Attorney-only		Interdisciplinary	
	#	%	#	%
Parental substance use	2,247	74%	2,458	83%
Expedited permanency planning	1,903	62%	2,163	73%
Homelessness	842	28%	1,015	34%
Prior child welfare involvement	1,473	48%	1,554	52%
Parent of color	1,582	52%	1,680	57%
Parent with a disability	1,607	53%	1,963	66%

Evidence Insight 2

For parents with interdisciplinary representation, **84.2% of children were never removed or if removed, were placed with kin** during the case; and **71.3% of children that were removed were reunified with their parents or living with kin** at case closure (Figure ES1). These favorable outcomes are higher than attorney-only cases and hold true for complex case factors that increase risk of removal or prevent reunification.

Figure ES1. Child Outcomes at Case Closure among Parents with ORPC Representation, by model



Evidence Insight 3

Interdisciplinary teams excel in using kinship care when removal from the home is necessary—**78.9% of children had at least one placement with kin** and spent **63.2% of time with kin** during out-of-home placement—rates that are significantly higher than attorney-only cases.

Evidence Insight 4

Once the parent defense team is fully assembled, child welfare cases with interdisciplinary representation typically last only 1 month longer than cases with attorney-only representation. Results also show that case length is largely driven by the number of case complexities, increasing in length with each new complex factor regardless of representation model.

Evidence to Action Statement: Interdisciplinary teams serve as a leveling-up strategy to address complex case factors and close the gap in outcomes for parents with higher acuity needs. By **scaling and sustaining interdisciplinary representation as an evidence-based model across Colorado jurisdictions**, Colorado justice and human service systems can effectively improve family preservation and strengthen court practices.

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Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel (ORPC). The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the State of Colorado, the ORPC, the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), the Colorado Governor's Office of Information Technology, or the University of Denver. Policy and budget recommendations do not represent the budget or legislative agendas of state agencies, the Governor's Office, or other partners. Any requests for funding or statutory changes will be developed in collaboration with the Governor's Office and communicated to the legislature through the regular budget and legislative processes.

Thank you to our partners who provided subject matter expertise and guidance on this project: Pang Ching "Bobby" Chen, Quang Tran, and Robert Newport, Colorado Department of Human Services; Malia Reddick, Melissa Thompson, Ashlee Arcilla, Jill Cohen, and Christy Van Gaasbeek, the ORPC; and the attorneys, social workers, and parents advocates who participated in research on the interdisciplinary model.

Data Sources

This study uses data from two sources (referred to herein as the "linked dataset") that were connected through the Linked Information Network of Colorado (LINC):

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

LINC is a collaborative effort of the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab and the Colorado Governor's Office of Information Technology that safely and securely connects and anonymizes data across state agencies and systems to fully inform solutions to specific societal challenges. The data used for this report came from a LINC project approved by participating data partners. Both partners approved the request. The findings do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Colorado Governor's Office of Information Technology, the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab, or the organizations contributing data.

Descriptive analysis on model foundations, including how the ORPC contractors spent their time on interdisciplinary cases, comes from analysis of billing codes in the RPPS, as well as qualitative inquiry with attorneys, social workers, and parent advocates.

Suggested Citation

Everson, C.L., Versen, E. & Giolitto, M. (March 2026). *Evidence synthesis: Colorado's interdisciplinary model of parent legal representation (Policy Brief)* (Report No. 20-06G). Denver, CO: Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver.

Introduction

Research shows that high-quality legal representation for parents is an effective strategy to improve outcomes in dependency and neglect cases.

The Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel (ORPC) was established in 2016 to strengthen parent representation based on recommendations to Colorado identified by the National Center for State Courts.

The ORPC invests in evidence-based decision making through a multi-year research partnership with the [Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab](#) (Colorado Lab).

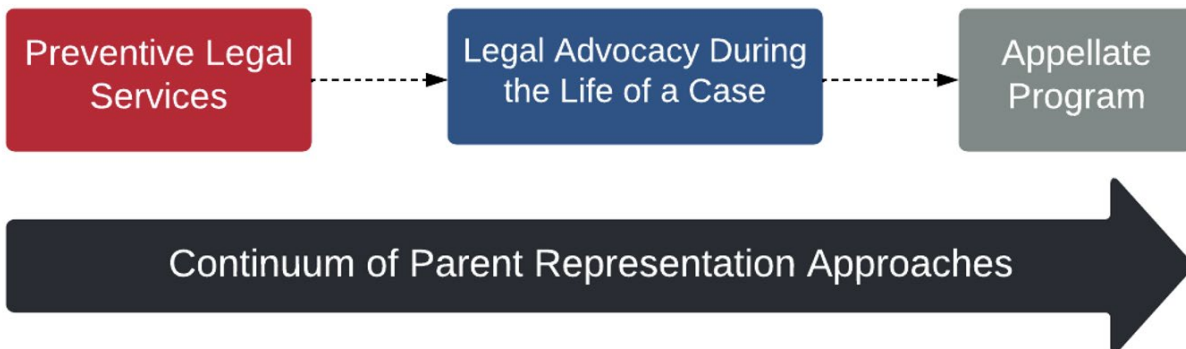
Together, they engage rigorous evidence building on the interdisciplinary (IDT) model of parent representation to strengthen families.

National research consistently demonstrates that high-quality legal representation for parents improves outcomes in dependency and neglect cases. Parent representation protects due process, upholds statutory rights, and supports balanced judicial decision making. This best practice is endorsed by national leaders including the [Children's Bureau](#),¹ the [American Bar Association](#),² [Casey Family Programs](#),³ and the [Family Justice Initiative](#).⁴

In 2014 and 2015, Colorado took significant steps to strengthen parent representation through [Senate Bill 14-203](#) and [House Bill 15-1149](#). These laws addressed major system gaps identified by the [National Center for State Courts](#)⁵ and established the ORPC as an independent agency within the judicial branch in 2016.

The ORPC leverages a continuum of parent representation approaches to best match legal strategy with unique family needs and case factors (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Continuum of Parent Representation Approaches



Courtesy [of Casey Family Programs](#)⁶

Interdisciplinary representation is part of this continuum and an essential approach to achieving positive outcomes for families with complex case needs. The IDT model pairs an attorney with a social worker or parent advocate with lived experience for families involved in child welfare. Together as a parent defense team, they protect the fundamental right to parent, address root causes of systems involvement, and promote family strengthening.

Investment in Evidence Building and Evidence Use

The ORPC is committed to evidence-based policy and practice. In 2018, the ORPC launched a Social Work Pilot Program through an [independent evaluation](#) conducted by Metropolitan State University. The Social Work Pilot Program was a precursor to the IDT model, which adds the essential role of parent advocates to legal representation. Since 2020, the ORPC has partnered with the Colorado Lab to rigorously build evidence for the IDT model of parent representation.

Previous Research on the Interdisciplinary Model

Following the ORPC's decision to adopt the interdisciplinary representation model in 2021, a multi-year strategic research agenda was developed by the Colorado Lab to understand the reach and effectiveness of the IDT model in Colorado. [Colorado's Steps to Building Evidence](#) anchored the strategy. We began by using ORPC administrative data and contractor narratives to [explore model foundations](#) (Step 1 and 2). Results outlined the [essential elements](#) of the IDT model that drive outcomes:

- **Build 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.
- **Advocate for the client both in and out of court:** Hold state actors accountable, ensure appropriate fact findings, provide hearing representation and court preparation.
- **Support 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.

What separates the interdisciplinary model from an attorney-only model is the depth and intentionality with which these support and advocacy activities are carried out.

Next, we examined [initial outcomes of child welfare cases](#) with ORPC parent representation using linked administrative data. This research identified a variety of social and legal factors that make a case more complex, commonly group together, and act as barriers to family strengthening.^{7, 8} Findings also showed that interdisciplinary teams serve parents with greater case complexities as compared to the attorney-only model and achieve on-par or better outcomes. The implication is that interdisciplinary teams act as a leveling-up strategy for parents with more complex cases and can help close the gap on outcomes for families involved in child welfare.

To interrogate these findings further, we obtained and analyzed an updated, 4-year linked dataset for child welfare cases closed between January 1, 2021, and March 6, 2025. Informed by previous findings, the current analytic approach compared outcomes of the attorney-only model to the IDT model for the full analytic sample and for cases with leading dual complexities. Outcomes of focus include family preservation, kinship care, and reunification and permanency.

An Evidence-Based Model

The best available research evidence establishes interdisciplinary representation for parents as an evidence-based model. In 2024, Colorado passed [HB24-1428](#),⁹ systemizing a process for evidence-based decision making in budget decisions and requiring evidence designations be assigned to programs/practices when research evidence is cited in the budget request. The available evidence designations include “evidence-informed,” “promising,” and “proven.” Based on the literature for IDT representation, which includes Colorado-specific outcomes data, the IDT model has achieved a *promising* evidence designation. The available evidence includes:

- A rigorous, quasi-experimental propensity score matching design study conducted in New York that demonstrates the IDT model led to reduced length of time in foster care and faster rates of reunification.¹⁰
- A rigorous, independent analysis of child welfare case outcomes conducted in Colorado that demonstrates the IDT model leads to improved family preservation, reunification, and placement with kin for families with complex case factors, as compared to attorney-only representation.

“The ORPC is nationally recognized for their work and many states are attempting to replicate what the ORPC has done.”

- Megan Kearsley, Colorado Court Improvement Program

Elevating Family Voice and Experience

The evidence-building process in Colorado has included a mixed methods or “numbers and narratives” approach. This means using both quantitative information from administrative data systems, as well as qualitative narratives from social workers, parent advocates, respondent parents, ORPC staff, and cross-system partners. The mixed methods approach reflects the ORPC’s commitment to ensuring the people behind the numbers are always visible. Throughout this policy brief, quotes and narratives are included to humanize the data—because behind every data point is a parent, a child, and a family’s story.

Description of the Study

The goal of the study was to understand the effects of interdisciplinary representation on child welfare outcomes.

The [Linked Information Network of Colorado](#) (LINC) was used to reliably connect legal representation data from the ORPC to Colorado Department of Human Services' (CDHS) child welfare case information over a 4-year period (January 1, 2021 – March 6, 2025).

The final sample consisted of 6,028 unique child welfare cases, representing 10,129 respondent parents and 11,775 children.

The goal of this study was to understand the effects of interdisciplinary representation on child welfare outcomes. Outcomes analyzed reflect priorities for child welfare and juvenile court systems, and matter deeply for the lived experiences of parents, children/youth, and whole family networks. The emphasis is on preserving family networks *during* a dependency and neglect case and improving long-term family togetherness at case closure toward relational permanency.

Establishing a Linked Dataset

Linking legal representation data to child welfare data was critical to establish a reliable dataset. Two data sources were used for linking (referred to as the “linked dataset”):

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

“Pairing a social worker or parent advocate with an attorney is the most beneficial model for representing parents that I have ever worked under.”

- Respondent Parent Social Worker

Data linkage was achieved using LINC. 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%.

Defining the Sample

The analytic approach compared outcomes of the attorney-only model to the IDT model for child welfare cases that closed between January 1, 2021, and March 6, 2025. Analysis was anchored to a unique child welfare 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.

The final analytic sample was 6,028 unique child welfare cases. Of these, 2,972 received IDT representation and 3,056 received attorney-only representation. Some child welfare cases were associated with multiple respondent parents. In this sample, there were 10,129 unique respondent parents and 11,775 unique children.

“Access to social workers and parent advocates has changed the game. Their advocacy on cases improves client outcomes, increases the parents’ strengths in the case, and makes their voice louder.”

Analysis

Data were descriptively analyzed, both for the full sample and for dual case complexities that previous research show commonly group together to heighten case acuity. Two sample z-tests were primarily used to determine if outcomes differed between representation models.

- Respondent Parent Counsel

Ray’s Story

Ray Rosa: Father of five, reunified parent, 2024 Reunification Hero

“We were pretty much staying out in the streets for a while, at least a half a year. Then, Sonia [Parent Advocate] got into our lives and she was able to get us vouchers for the first couple months. Then she got us housing. It felt like I had a second chance at life ... But I couldn’t do it without Sonia. She gave us life and breath and energy that we needed. She fought for us. Parent Advocates, they’re like a gift from God. She was like our angel.”



Key Findings

Interdisciplinary representation was compared to attorney-only representation to assess:

- How contractors spend their time, in line with the IDT model’s essential elements.
- Reach and growth of the IDT model and changes over time.
- Case characteristics served by each representation model.
- Family preservation outcomes during a case, including use of kinship care.
- Permanency and reunification outcomes at case closure.
- Case timelines for each representation model.

Interdisciplinary Team Activities

Research Question: What do interdisciplinary teams do?

Key Finding: Drawing on their unique strengths, team members work cohesively as parent defenders to combat root causes of child welfare involvement and build long-term supports that strengthen the family. Together, they maintain fidelity to the model and effectively drive positive outcomes.

Interdisciplinary teams invest in three interrelated activities to wrap support around families during a dependency and neglect case: a) Building a client centered-team; b) Advocating for the client in and out of court; and c) Supporting the client in addressing their needs. How interdisciplinary team members spend their time on each of these activities differs by role. Leading billing categories in each activity 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. They are meant to be illustrative of what is categorized in each major activity.

As a team, members balance their time between the three main activities (Table 2).

Individually, 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 3).

“I am able to spend more time with parents, taking them to family time, treatment, caseworker home visits, and helping find resources. I have been able to ensure my Native American parents receive the cultural support they need, including going to [culturally matched] treatment centers.”

- Parent Advocate

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%

Evidence-to-Impact Statement

Intentional staffing of interdisciplinary teams creates case efficiencies and ensures attorneys can focus on the legal aspects of the case, social workers can focus on helping families navigate system policies and requirements, and parent advocates can focus on parent engagement and emotional support to reduce trauma.

Interdisciplinary Representation Reach and Growth

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

Key Finding: The IDT model has expanded over time, with over half (55%) of child welfare cases served by the ORPC receiving the IDT model.

Reach and growth metrics are important signals for how the interdisciplinary model has scaled since launch in 2021, through strategic expansion by the ORPC and resources dedicated by

legislative and cross-system partners. We examined reach and growth in three ways, anchored to judicial district, to reflect opportunities for juvenile courts system improvements.

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 2](#), next page). Data for this analysis are from the RPPS. Child welfare case volume comes from the [Child Welfare Training System County Size Map](#).¹¹ The goal was to identify reach and current availability of ORPC representation models.

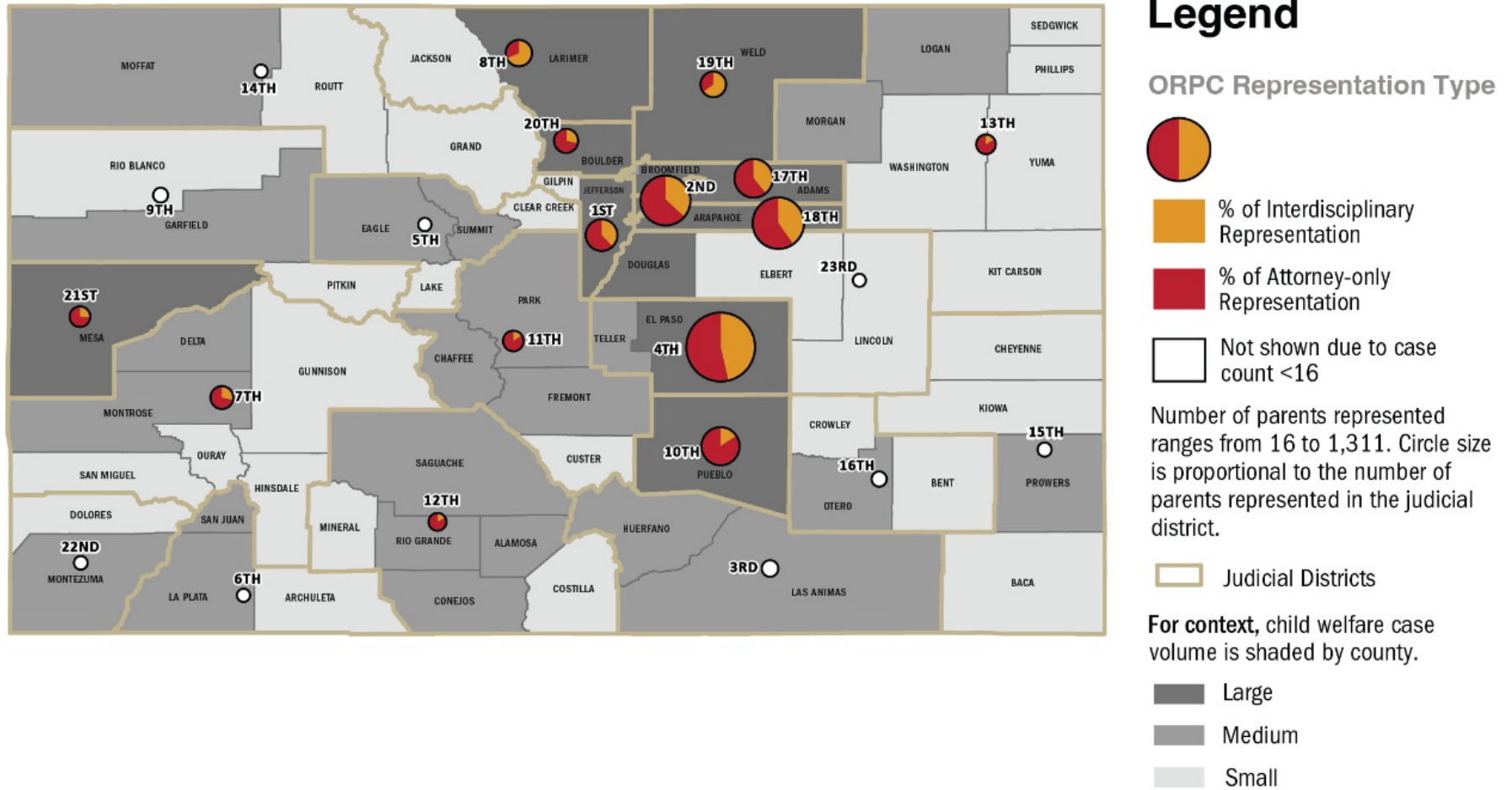
Second, we examined **geographic distribution of the linked dataset** used for outcomes reporting, by judicial district. All child welfare cases that met criteriaⁱ for analysis, closed between January 1, 2021, and March 6, 2025, and had ORPC representation (n = 6,028) were included (Table 4).

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%

ⁱ To be included, 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.

Figure 2. Geographic Reach of ORPC Representation, January 1, 2025 through March 6, 2025



Shayna's Story

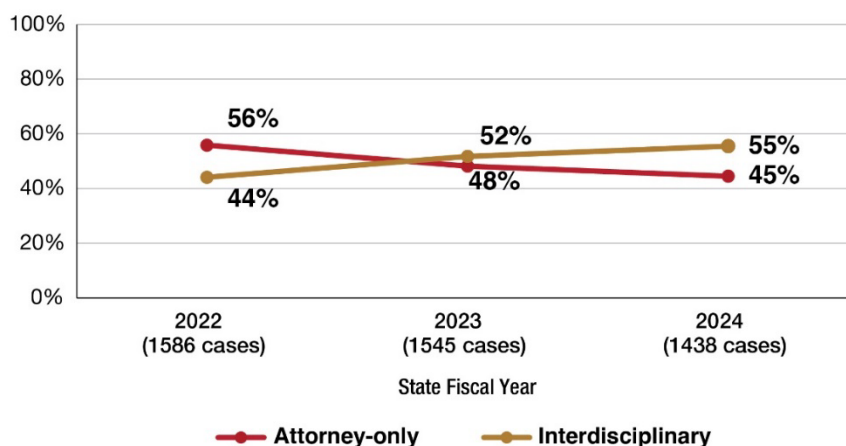
Shayna Koran: Parent of four, reunified parent, 2025 Reunification Hero and Parent Advocate

"I don't think [I would have been reunified], if it wasn't for [my Respondent Parent Counsel] Stephanie. Stephanie was my saving grace. I love her with every single piece of me. She believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. She saw things in me that I still don't see in myself. Knowing how much pride she has gotten in my success truly is something that I will never be able to thank her for."



Third, we examined **trends in representation model** for closed child welfare cases from 2022 through 2024 **in the linked dataset** (n = 4,569). Changes are visualized in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Trends in ORPC Representation Model Used, by year, in the linked analytic sample



Evidence-to-Impact Statement

Ensuring statewide access to interdisciplinary teams will require increased resources, strong collaboration across system colleagues, and an expanded pool of committed attorneys and advocates willing to support this work. Consistent availability of parent representation and steady resourcing is essential to ensure this evidence-based model is accessible to all Colorado families to drive positive outcomes.

Case Complexities

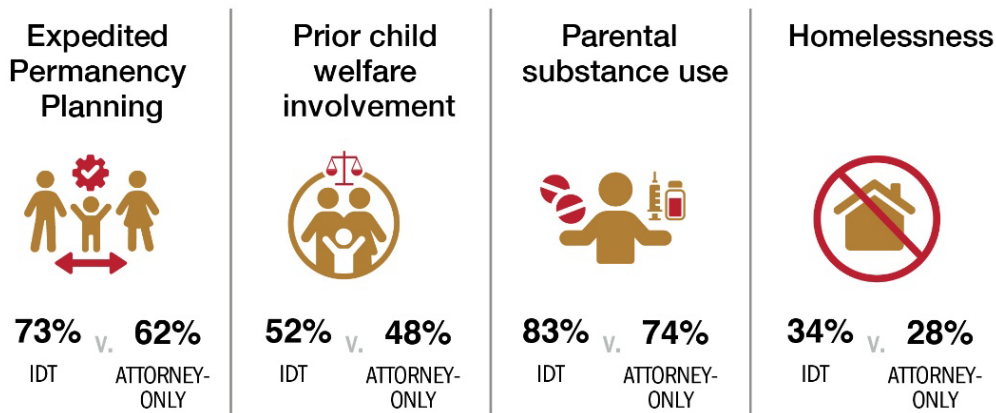
Research Question: Who do interdisciplinary teams serve?

Key Finding: Interdisciplinary teams serve cases with significantly higher rates of complex factors, including substance use and housing instability.

Research shows that a variety of social and legal factors make child welfare cases more complex and act as barriers to families staying together with long-term stability. Complex cases require comprehensive, practical support to achieve positive outcomes. Interdisciplinary teams are uniquely suited to meet this need.

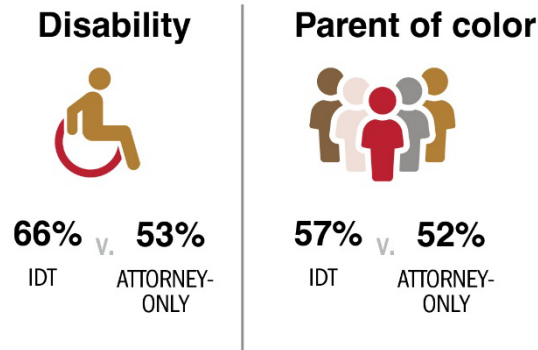
Interdisciplinary teams serve cases with significantly higher rates of case complexities analyzed ($p < 0.01$), as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Comparison of Complex Case Factors on Closed Child Welfare Cases in the Linked Dataset, by representation model



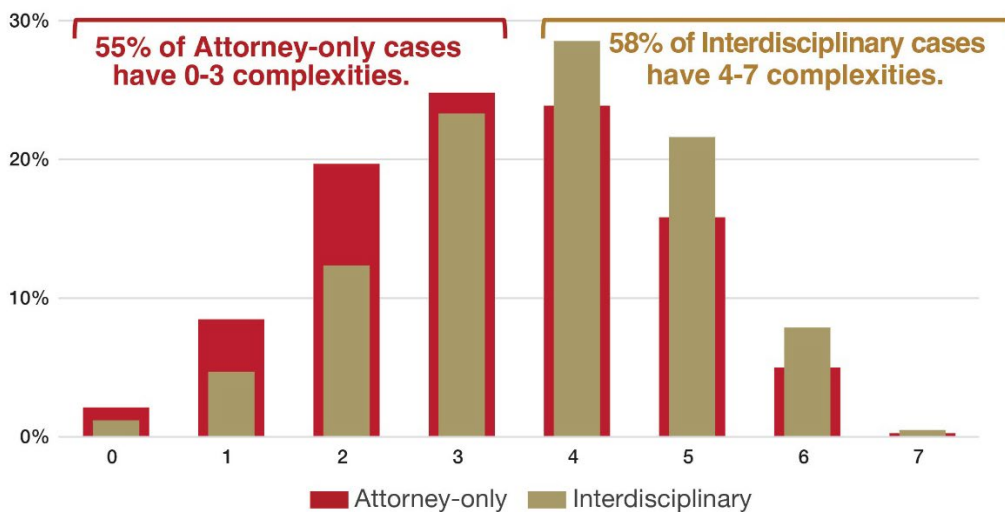
Interdisciplinary teams also support more families that face injustice in the juvenile courts and child welfare systems as a parent of color or parenting with a disability ($p < 0.01$; Figure 5).

Figure 5. Comparison of Parent Characteristics on Closed Child Welfare Cases in the Linked Dataset, by representation model



Cases often have *multiple* parental and child welfare factors, and it's the combination of these factors that makes them especially complex. Interdisciplinary teams are used significantly more often for cases with multiple complexities ($p < 0.01$), as shown in Figure 6. By providing intensive wraparound support to reduce risks and strengthen protective factors, interdisciplinary teams [achieve equal or better results](#) as attorney-only representation.

Figure 6. Percent of Closed Child Welfare Cases in the Linked Dataset, by number of case complexities and representation model



Evidence-to-Impact Statement

When complex case factors are not addressed, some Colorado families will be left behind. Interdisciplinary teams act as a leveling-up factor to ensure all Colorado families can achieve positive outcomes associated with high-quality legal representation.

Keeping Families Together

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

Key Finding: For parents receiving interdisciplinary representation, 84.2% of children were never removed or if removed, were placed with kin.

- Children whose parents received interdisciplinary representation spent 63.2% of time with kin during out-of-home placement.

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

Key Finding: For parents receiving interdisciplinary representation, 71.3% of children were reunified with their parents or living with kin at case closure.

Two key outcomes were examined to understand the value of interdisciplinary representation in reducing family separation and improving togetherness: 1) family preservation outcomes *during a case*, and 2) permanency outcomes at *case closure*. In addition, [Colorado children and family-serving systems](#)¹² have a strong emphasis on using kinship care when child/youth removal from the home is necessary. As such, use of kinship care, by representation model, was also examined as part of the family preservation outcomes analysis.

Family Preservation Outcomes, during a case

Family preservation is a combination of children who remained at home for the entirety of a child welfare case *and* children who were removed during a case and placed with kin.

Full Sample

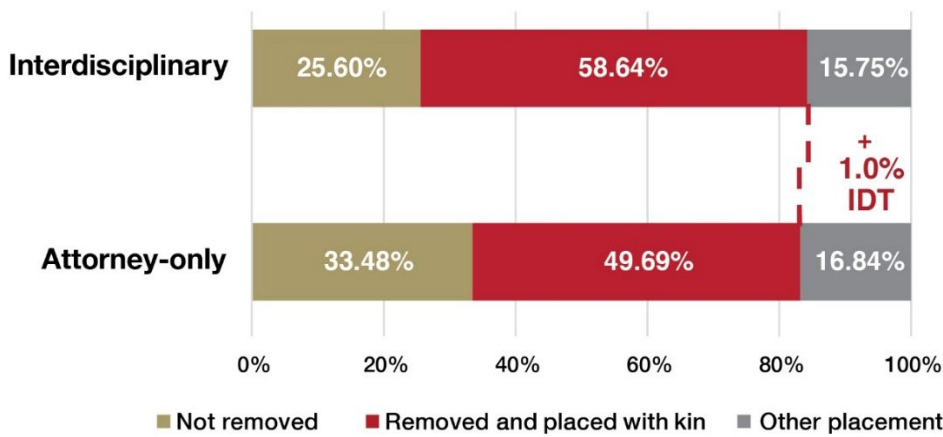
For parents receiving IDT representation, 84.2% of children were never removed or if removed, were placed with kin (attorney-only: 83.2%) (Figure 7). While this difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.1176$), it is of high practical significance. For both models, ensuring that over 80% of children are never removed or can be with kin if removed is a strong outcome that illustrates ORPC's meaningful impact for Colorado families.

“When a parent feels that someone truly supports them, they engage differently and it can mean the difference between Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) and reunification.”

- Respondent Parent Counsel

Nationally, only 31% of children are placed with kin when removed, compared to 59% in Colorado when parents receive ORPC interdisciplinary representation.¹³

Figure 7. 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.

Dual Case Complexities

We also assessed whether favorable outcomes held true for dual case complexities shown to interact to increase risk of removal and foster care. This analysis is for the dual complexities of parents facing substance use and with an expedited permanency planning (EPP) case (children under 6 years of age) (n = 2,937 children in the attorney-only group; n = 3,884 in the IDT group).

For both models, 84% of children were never removed or if removed, were placed with kin. 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.

Use of Kinship Care

When removal from the home must occur, research shows that kinship care is an effective strategy to reduce trauma, maintain cultural ties, improve mental health outcomes of children, increase educational attainment, achieve greater placement stability, and foster belonging with the whole family network—both during and after case closure.¹⁴

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

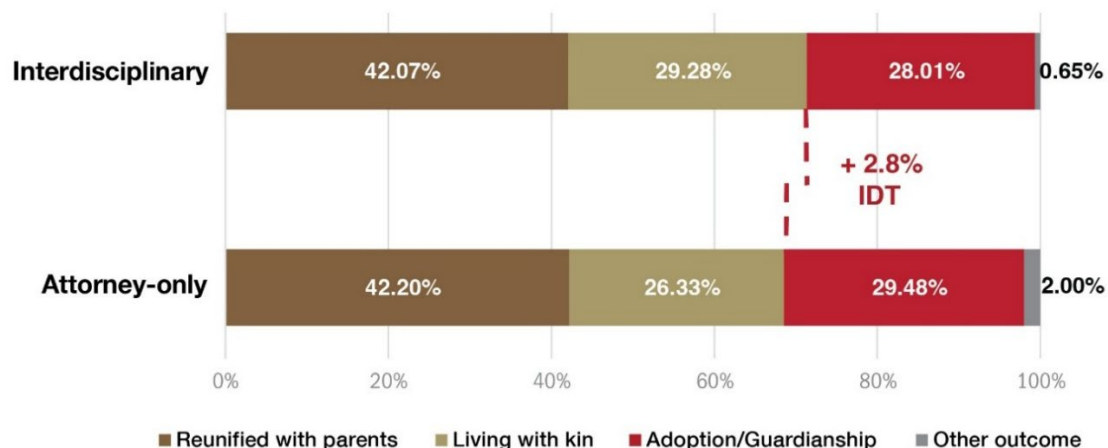
Permanency outcomes refer to where a child lands at the end of a case and includes reunification with parents, living with kin permanently, adoption/guardianship, or other outcome, such as Division of Youth Corrections discharge. In every child welfare case, the ultimate goal is to keep children safely with their parents. When reunification with parents is not possible, permanency with kin can keep children within their family network, promote long-term well-being, and reduce intergenerational systems involvement.

Full Sample

For parents receiving IDT representation, 71.3% of children were reunified with their parents or living with kin at case closure (attorney-only: 68.5%) (Figure 8). This difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.02$).

Nationally, 45% of children are reunified after removal, comparable to the 42% reunification rate achieved in Colorado when parents receive IDT representation. When living with kin is added to reunification with parents, the national rate is 52%, compared to 71% achieved in Colorado by the ORPC interdisciplinary representation model.¹⁵

Figure 8. 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 tribal agency (non-IV-E), other public agency, transfer to foster youth in transition program, and juvenile justice agency.

Dual Case Complexities

We also assessed whether favorable outcomes held true for dual case complexities shown to interact to increase risk of youth aging out of the system and prevent reunification. This analysis is for the dual complexities of cases with parents of color and youth beyond control of parents (n = 199 youth in the attorney-only group; n = 196 in the IDT group).

For the IDT group, 82.7% of youth reunified with their parents or stayed permanently with kin (compared to 77.9% for attorney-only). 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.

Evidence-to-Impact Statement

Without interdisciplinary representation, parents with more complexities would be less likely to achieve positive outcomes—leaving more family networks separated. The favorable outcomes achieved by both representation models show that the ORPC is matching each parent with the right level of support. Pairing attorneys with social workers or parent advocates for the most complex cases ensures the interdisciplinary model is used where it is most needed.

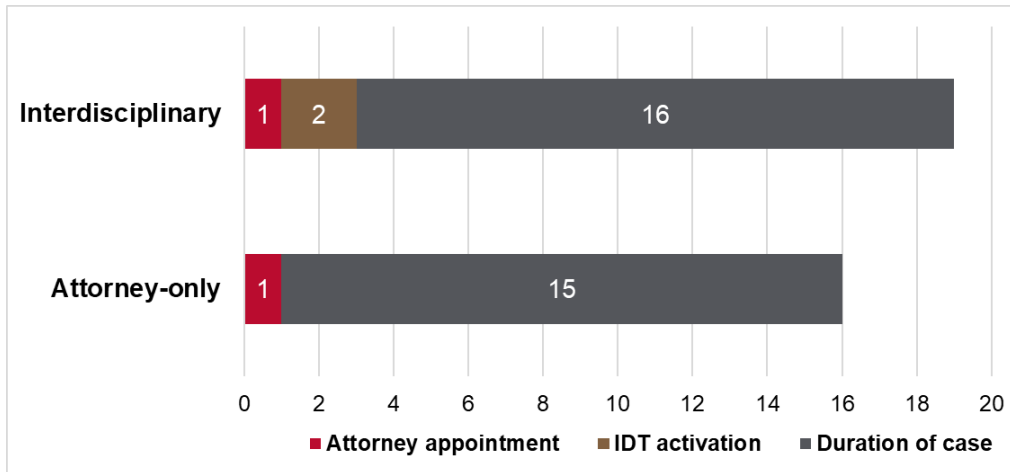
Case Timelines

Research Question: What case timelines are associated with each model?

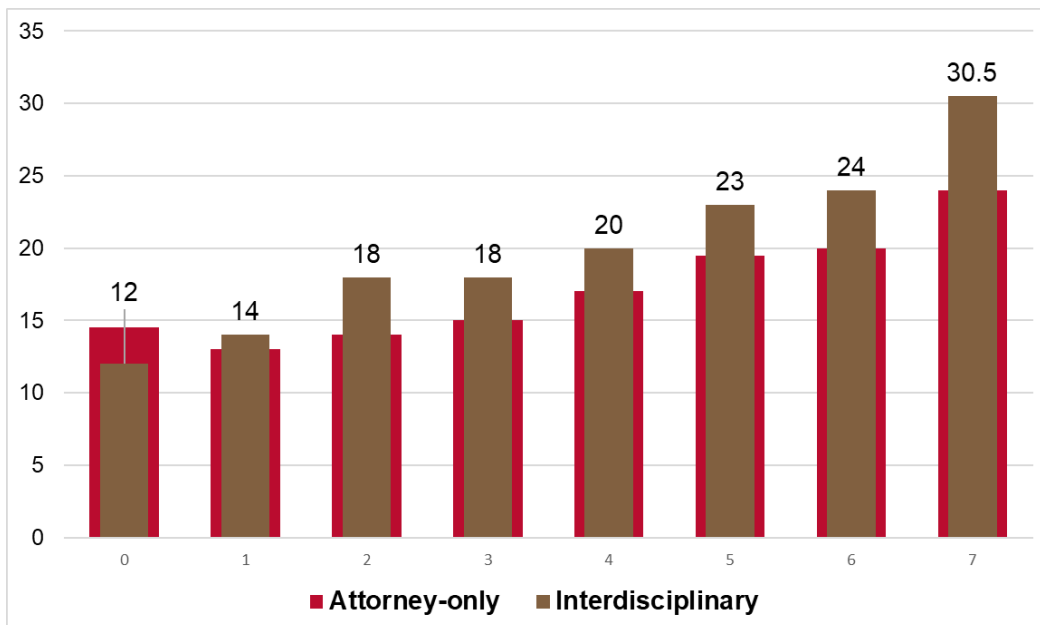
Key Finding: Child welfare case length is driven largely by the number of case complexities on a case, which interdisciplinary teams serve more of.

Meeting complex case needs, addressing root causes of child welfare involvement, and promoting long-term family strengthening cannot be done on a rushed timeline. While shorter involvement in child welfare is desirable to reduce trauma to children and parents, what the “right case length” is must be tailored to unique case needs and what it will take to drive *sustained* outcomes in family togetherness, including parent reunification and relational permanency with kin.

Child welfare cases with interdisciplinary representation typically last 3 months longer than cases with attorney-only representation (IDT median length: 19 months; attorney-only median length: 16 months). As illustrated in Figure 9, the increased case length comes from the time it takes for an attorney to request and activate a social worker or parent advocate after appointment. **This means there is only a 1-month difference in length once the full team is assembled, signaling a concrete opportunity to streamline activation of the interdisciplinary team.** Activating the team as early as possible maximizes the opportunity for positive outcomes *and* an efficient timeline.

Figure 9. Median Case Length, in months, by representation model


Results also show that case length is largely driven by the number of case complexities, increasing in length with each new complex factor regardless of representation model (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Median Case Length, in months, by number of case complexities


Evidence-to-Impact Statement

A case that closes earlier but without outcomes matched to parent goals and child needs, or where outcomes cannot be sustained over time, is not beneficial to families or systems. Reducing the costs of ongoing and intergenerational systems involvement—and moving families from a state of surviving to thriving—requires adequate case length for families to receive the benefits of high-quality legal representation.

Mobilizing Evidence for Action

Findings show the interdisciplinary model is an effective leveling-up strategy to achieve justice for parents with more complex cases. Child removal rates, use of kinship care, and reunification rates are favorable for both attorney-only and IDT representation. Interdisciplinary teams represent parents with greater case complexities (e.g., substance use issues). Interdisciplinary teams also serve more parents of color and parents with disabilities, who can face systemic bias. The on-par outcomes show that interdisciplinary teams help close the gap for parents with complex cases.

Without investment in interdisciplinary representation, more Colorado families would remain separated and not achieve reunification or relational permanency. Scaling and sustaining this evidence-based model is an essential strategy to improve juvenile court practices and strengthen families across generations.

Achieving this bold vision requires adequate investment in the ORPC by policymakers and philanthropic funders, meaningful partnerships from county and state family-serving systems, quality delivery of the IDT model by ORPC contractors, and the collaboration of families with lived experience to build human-centered solutions that are research-backed.

Brittany and Nate's Story

Brittany and Nate Bustamante: Parents of four, reunified parents, 2023 Reunification Heroes and Parent Advocates

"We really had a good team that was a really good support to us and still to this day, all those people are considered family. We were talking in the garage one day about we want to go to Jefferson County Courthouse, sit in a courtroom, find parents who had just gotten their children removed and see how we can help them ... And then two weeks later, I got an email from ORPC about this job opportunity coming up, being a Parent Advocate, and doing exactly what we wanted to do."



Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. (2017). *High quality legal representation for all parties in child welfare proceedings* (Log No: ACYF-CB-IM-17-02). <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/im1702.pdf>
- ² American Bar Association. (n.d.). *National Alliance for Parent Representation*. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/project_areas/parentrepresentation/
- ³ Casey Family Programs. (2019, August 01). *How does high-quality legal representation for parents support better outcomes?* <https://www.casey.org/quality-parent-representation/>
- ⁴ Family Justice Initiative. (2025). *High-quality legal representation*. <https://familyjusticeinitiative.org/model/high-quality-representation/>
- ⁵ National Center For State Courts. (2007). *Colorado court improvement program respondent parents' counsel task force statewide needs assessment: Final report*. <https://ncjfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Colorado-CIP-Respondent-Parents-Counsel-Task-Force-Statewide-Needs-Assessment.pdf>
- ⁶ Casey Family Programs. (2024). *Preventive legal advocacy continuum*. <https://www.casey.org/preventive-legal-advocacy-topic-page/>
- ⁷ 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.
- ⁸ 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.
- ⁹ HB24-1428, 2024 Regular Sess. (Col. 2024). <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb24-1428>
- ¹⁰ Gerber, L., Pang, Y., Ross, T., Guggenheim, M., Pecora, P., & Miller, J. (2019). Effects of an interdisciplinary approach to parental representation in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 102, 42–55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.04.022>
- ¹¹ Colorado Office of Children, Youth & Families, Division of Child Welfare. (n.d.). *CWTS county size map*. <https://coloradocwts.com/cwts-county-size-map/>
- ¹² CO4Kids. (2025). *Kinship care*. <https://co4kids.org/kinship-care/>

- ¹³ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2025). *Children in foster care by placement type in United States*. <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>
- ¹⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022). *kinship care and the child welfare system* [Fact sheet]. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/kinship-care-and-child-welfare-system/>
- ¹⁵ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2025). *Children exiting foster care by reason in United States*. <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/line/6277-children-exiting-foster-care-by-exit-reason?loc=1&loct=1#1/1/false/2545,1095/asc/2629/13051>