

## Philosophy

Family Engagement Meetings (FEM) are a creative tool used by Child Protection Specialists to empower families in formulating a plan of treatment to provide a safe protective environment for their children where issues of abuse/neglect have come to the attention of the Child and Family Services Division (CFSD). Participants include birth parents, extended family, Child Protection Specialists (CPS), community support persons and professionals involved with the family. FEM meetings give individuals the opportunity to present concerns to be addressed regarding the child(ren)'s safety, to identify strengths that the family currently possess and to contribute to the creation of a plan to support safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for the child(ren).

All participants will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, per Montana law, 41-3-205(3)(k), MCA, as a participant of a Family Group Decision Making Meeting/Family Engagement Meeting. The plan of information shared during the FEM may be submitted to the court.

## Definitions

**Facilitator:** Refers to the person whose primary responsibility is to facilitate the meeting. The facilitator should be a FEM Coordinator if available. If not, a qualified child protective services staff member who is **NOT** assigned to the case may facilitate the meeting after consulting with the Child Welfare Manager.

The following is a list of required theoretical/practical training and practice exercises that the CFSD staff must successfully complete, under the direction of a qualified FEM Mentor before facilitating FEM Meetings on an independent basis. The employee must have the endorsement of his or her supervisor before pursuing the training curriculum.

1. Complete advanced training provided by the regional FEM facilitator including an overview of FEM agendas and materials.
2. Observe an initial FEM, in which they are not a participant.
3. Participate in a FEM as the caseworker.
4. Co-facilitate a meeting with a qualified facilitator.
5. Facilitate a meeting under the observation of a qualified facilitator.
6. Successfully demonstrate facilitation skills.

**Family:** Refers to the birth parent(s) of the child(ren) at risk of abuse or neglect and may include additional extended family of the child(ren) or parents (i.e. members of the child/family's tribe, godparents, or stepparents or anyone who is considered family).

**FEM Core  
Values and Goals:**

FEM Core Values include:

- All families have strengths.
- Families deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.
- Families are encouraged and supported to make well-informed decisions and plans about keeping their children safe.
- Families and community members should be partners in determining solutions, and making decision. Partnership is a process.
- All participants have a genuine voice at the meeting, and their ideas, needs and perspectives should be heard.

Involving family in the decision making process through Family Engagement Meetings enhances family and child protection specialists' ability to develop successful safety, permanency and well-being plans for children within statutory time lines. Increased use of Family Engagement Meetings should increase:

- Parent, extended family and child(ren) involvement in the case and the concurrent planning process;
- Number of children maintained in their families;
- Number of children placed in kinship care;
- Increased involvement of extended family in planning for a child's permanency including maternal and paternal family members;
- Increased safety outcomes for children;
- Timely permanency outcomes for the child(ren); and
- Assessment and identification of needs and support services for child(ren) and parents.

Additional benefits of Family Engagement Meetings include but are not limited to:

- Development of collaborative working relationship between FEM participants to achieve common goals;
- Increases the family's support network, reduces isolation, and blends formal and informal services/supports;
- Promotes honesty, trust, team approach, and partnering with family and community;
- A way to honor cultural diversity;
- Family feels they have a voice and are more invested in a plan they help develop;
- Enhanced communication among family members and the agency;

- Early intervention and family involvement may lead to an earlier resolution of safety concerns; and
- A transparent process with FEM participants being provided with all information necessary for planning for child(ren).

The goals and purpose for holding a FEM meeting should change and be adapted to meet the needs of each family. Possible goals and meeting purpose include but are not limited to:

- At the onset of removal, engage the extended family in planning for the child(ren), identifying connections and to empower individuals to actively participate in developing a permanency plan for the youth.
- At the onset of a case, assist in family identification through diligent search efforts to locate and identify kinship placement options for the child(ren) and inform extended family of ways to maintain connections with the child(ren) in care.
- Bring together people involved with the parent(s) and child(ren) to make the best decisions possible concerning the child(ren) in regards to placement, services, and visitation.
- Placement planning including a move in care (i.e. transition home, placement with relatives, etc.)
- Discuss safety issues concerning child(ren) who may need to be placed in out- of- home care to assist in identifying the safest and most stable possible placements.
- Develop transition plans to adulthood for youth 14 years of age and older.
- Safety, reunification and transition planning for case closure and children returning home.
- Develop permanency plans for children needing placement stability and identification of permanent connections and supports.
- Explain CFSD processes and policies to families including, but not limited to, support in treatment planning completion, identifying barriers and additional service needs.
- FEM Review Meetings are appropriate at any stage of the case and are used to review and make necessary changes to the initial FEM plan.

### **Offer of Meeting**

The CPS will offer the parent(s) a FEM meeting in all open cases within the first 30 days of opening a case regardless of whether the children have been placed in out of home care. In addition to communication with the CPS, FEMs provide another opportunity

for every family to participate in case planning.

After the CPS has explained the FEM meeting to the parent(s), the parent(s) will sign the Family Engagement Meeting Referral/Offer of Meeting Form either agreeing or declining participation in a FEM. The CPS will document the offer of a meeting along with parent(s) consent or denial of a FEM meeting on ACTD.

Refusal of a FEM meeting does not necessarily rule out a FEM meeting. Only one parent needs to consent for a FEM meeting to be held. If both parents deny a FEM meeting, the CPS worker will notify the FEM Coordinator that the parent(s) denied a FEM along with the reasons for denial. The FEM coordinator will then reoffer the FEM meeting to the parent(s) within 30 days of their initial offer. The FEM Coordinator will document efforts and parent(s) consent or denial of FEM meeting on ACTD.

If the parent(s) continue to decline the FEM meeting and CFSD has Temporary Legal Custody or a specific court order which determines a FEM meeting is in the best interest of planning for the child(ren), a meeting shall still be conducted absent compelling reasons that one should not occur as set forth below.

If the CPS, CPSS, the FEM Coordinator, and CWM are in agreement that there are compelling reasons that the parent(s) of the child(ren) should not have a FEM meeting, the FEM Coordinator will document the reasons no meeting was held on ACTL. The FEM Coordinator will also contact the parent(s) or guardian explaining the reasons why a FEM meeting will not be held at this time. Circumstances where it may not be appropriate to have a meeting include but are not limited to:

- Concerns of safety regarding one or more participants. FEM coordinator will attempt to work with the family to resolve safety concerns and explore alternative forms of participation if there are safety concerns.
- Family refuses to participate or is not present.

If there are no compelling reasons to not hold a meeting, the CPS and/or Family Engagement Meeting Coordinator will ensure a meeting is scheduled. The assessment to not hold a meeting will continually be reassessed throughout the life of the case during individual and permanency team staffings to determine if circumstances have changed and a meeting would be appropriate.

## **Referral**

The CPS will complete, and have the family sign, the Family Engagement Referral Form/Offer of Meeting Form (CFS-FEM-008) and attach the signed releases of information, and if applicable an affidavit and turn the referral in to the FEM Coordinator or CWM in his/her region.

The CPS and FEM Coordinator will make reasonable efforts to have an initial FEM meeting as soon as possible after the parents consenting to a FEM meeting; therefore, the CPS and FEM Coordinator will work as a team to complete the necessary components for a FEM to occur. Referrals will be prioritized in accordance with safety, permanency and well-being needs of the individual families.

## **Invitees**

The FEM coordinator, parents, family, service providers and the CPS will develop the invitation list for the FEM meeting and record it on the referral form. It is important for both maternal and paternal family members to be included and for the parents to help with the process of generating the invitation list for a FEM meeting. Participants include but are not limited to:

- Birth Mother
- Birth Father
- Children of concern (if appropriate)
- Step parents
- Foster parents
- Adult siblings
- Extended maternal and paternal family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.)
- Individuals the parent(s) consider as family
- Close neighbors
- Cultural advocates including Tribal elders
- Friends
- Transitional living/Chafee provider
- Service providers/support services
- Attorneys
- Guardian Ad-Litem/CASA volunteers
- Clergy
- School personnel
- Counselors

## **Meeting Preparation**

The FEM Coordinator and CPS work together to prepare the family for the meeting. The preparation for the meeting includes,

but is not limited to:

1. Review the Family Engagement Referral Form/Offer of Meeting Form (CFS-FEM-008) and discuss the purpose/goals for the FEM listed.
2. Review the invitation list and if necessary suggest or add additional persons to invite to ensure the list is complete. If the CPS or extended family recommends additional invitees the FEM and/or CPS will discuss the additional invitees with the parents.
3. Screen participants for safety issues and if appropriate exclude persons from attendances that pose a safety risk to the participants. Alternative ways of participating by the excluded person will be explored.
  - If parent(s), family and/or CPS are in disagreement about who should or should not attend the FEM meeting, the FEM coordinator will work with the parent(s) and/or family during preparation to try and overcome the barriers so all participants can attend. FEM meetings do not typically exclude family participation unless the participant could be emotionally or physically harmful to other participants or the process. If FEM Coordinator is unable to overcome the barriers to participation, the FEM Coordinator will staff the concerns with the parent(s), CPS, and his/her immediate supervisor to discuss alternative methods of participation. The FEM Coordinator will document the reasons for exclusion on the meeting FEM Summary and Plan.
4. The CPS, in coordination with their supervisor if necessary, will review and note case considerations on the Family Engagement Meeting Detailed Agenda (CFS-FEM-003), in order to prepare for the meeting and have answers to the topics/concerns outlined on the document.
5. Conducts a thorough search and attempts to contact everyone on the invitation list to engage them in participation in the FEM meeting.
6. The FEM Coordinator prepares participants prior to the FEM meeting through conversations by phone and/or in person. During preparation, the FEM Coordinator will outline the goals

and purpose of the FEM along with asking participants if there are any concerns and/or goals they would like to discuss. The FEM Coordinator will also ask participants to identify impending dangers, family protective capacities, and other possible invitees.

7. Develop a plan to involve the child(ren) in the FEM meeting. Child(ren) involvement will vary from meeting to meeting based upon the age of the child, child's willingness to participate, child's emotional stability, parent(s) request, and other identified factors. Through preparation, the child(ren) will be assisted in understanding why a FEM meeting is being held, the child(ren)'s role in the meeting, who will be attending the meeting, and what the child(ren) need to feel safe to express himself/herself. The child(ren) can participate in FEM meetings by attending the FEM meeting, providing input to FEM Coordinator, CPS, therapist, or an identified support person for the child(ren), letters, videos, and other identified tools. If the child(ren) attend the meeting, the child(ren) need to have an identified support person whose specific role is to be there for the child(ren) and watch for cues that they need to leave the meeting or to ensure that the child(ren)'s information is being presented.
8. Work to prepare the family for the Family Alone Time component to each meeting.
9. Develop a plan to address cultural awareness/sensitivity issues as needed for all families. Prayer, foods, and environmental settings may be important cultural aspects of a FEM meeting.
10. The Family, CPS, and FEM Coordinator set a date and time for the meeting.
11. The FEM Coordinator, CPS, or designee locates and reserves a room for the meeting and arranges for appropriate food or meals to be served.
12. The FEM Coordinator, CPS, or designee sends FEM participants invitations to the FEM Meeting with a FEM pamphlet enclosed. Invitations can and do continue up to the day of the meeting.

### **Meeting Format**

Each FEM meeting will follow a structured but flexible agenda to meet the needs of individual families. The detail in which each meeting component is discussed may vary however, all major

agenda topics need to be covered.

Three agendas have been developed for use before and during each FEM. Each agenda reflects consistent meeting expectations but the use of each agenda will differ. The agendas, and their purpose, is listed below:

1. Family Engagement Meeting Agenda with Subsections (CFS-FEM-001). This agenda provides detailed information for each meeting section and subsection. Suggested discussion topics and an explanation for each subsection are included. This agenda is utilized to assist meeting coordinators in preparing for each meeting as well as offers CPS staff the ability to reference meeting topics for consideration.
2. Family Engagement Meeting At-A-Glance Agenda (CFS-FEM-002). This agenda shows a brief overview of the meeting and flow of content. It is distributed to all attendees at the beginning of each meeting to set discussion expectations and guide conversations.
3. Family Engagement Meeting Detailed Agenda (CFS-FEM-003). This agenda shows a detailed overview of discussion section and subsection. This document should be used by CPS staff in preparation for the meeting to determine case considerations to be explored and discussed at the meeting.

### **Post Meeting Activities**

The FEM Coordinator will complete and distribute the FEM Summary and Plan (CFS-FEM-006) within 30 days of meeting completion. Invited participants not in attendance may receive a copy of the FEM Summary and Plan.

### **Documentation, Continuous Quality Improvement and Data collection**

All FEM meetings will be entered on CAPS on the SERN screen using the code FCFGR. FEM documents (i.e. Summary and Plan, Referral/Offer of Meeting Forms, Sign In Sheets, etc.) will be uploaded to DocGen under the Birthmother's CAP's ID number. An ACTD entry will be made for every FEM under the code FGM and will be copied to all parents and children connected to the case. The entry will read as follows:

"A Family Engagement meeting held this date. Review set for



(date). Summary sent on (date). For more information see Doc Gen under CAPS ID \_\_\_\_\_.”

In addition, meeting frequency will be recorded and identified on each regional caseload tracking form.

To gather additional information regarding the effectiveness of the FEM meetings, a survey will be provided to all participants after each meeting. Participants can complete the survey immediately after the meeting by filling out a hard copy or completing an electronic version on survey monkey. If a participant wishes to complete the survey at another time, they will be emailed a link to the survey for completion.

Utilizing the sign in sheet, participants will consent to completing a survey and indicate the means by which they intend to complete the survey. Results will be populated by the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) unit for analysis.

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