


**DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES  
SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
311 W. SARATOGA STREET  
BALTIMORE, MD 21201**

**DATE:** April 13, 2012

**CIRCULAR LETTER:** SSA # 12-35

**TO:** Directors, Local Department of Social Services  
Assistant Directors of Services

**FROM:** Carnitra D. White   
Executive Director  
Social Services Administration

**RE:** Engaging Fathers, Non-Custodial Parents,  
Incarcerated Parents and Paternal Kin in Child  
Welfare Cases

**PROGRAM AFFECTED:** In-Home Services and Out-of-Home Placement  
Services

**ORIGINATING OFFICE:** Child Welfare Policy & Practice

**ACTION REQUIRED OF:** All Local Departments

**REQUIRED ACTION:** Implement Policy and Procedures

**ACTION DUE DATE:** July 1, 2012

**CONTACT PERSONS:** Debbie Ramelmeier, Deputy Executive Director  
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**Purpose:**

This policy standardizes the actions that should be taken to ensure that fathers, non-custodial, parents, incarcerated parents and paternal kin are actively engaged during the continuum of child welfare services. The goal is to prevent children and youth from languishing in foster care due to failure of the child welfare system to engage potential relative resources in a timely manner. Specific policy guidelines will elaborate on the role of the Family Finder as the practice is adopted in local departments who did not participate in the Fostering Connections demonstration project.

**Background:**

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351) requires that states “exercise due diligence to identify and provide notice to all adult grandparents and other adult relatives of the child.” These relatives should be involved early in the case planning process to improve permanency outcomes for children and youth and to establish family connections for children receiving child welfare services. Efforts should be made to engage family members other than mothers, custodial parents, and their extended family members when children come to the attention of a child welfare program. Exploring all potential relative resources for children demonstrates reasonable efforts and supports the core tenets of family centered practice. In addition, engaging all of the members of a child’s family is the expectation of the Fostering Connections legislation to facilitate these interactions and relationships while a child is involved with the child welfare system.

**Actions Required:**

The local departments shall diligently search and engage fathers, non-custodial parents, incarcerated parents and paternal relatives during the continuum of all child welfare service interventions. Fathers are defined as biological, adoptive, putative, stepfathers, and fathers named by the mother. Non-custodial parents are defined as the parent who was not the legal custodian or primary caretaker of the child at the time of the child welfare intervention. The non-custodial parent could refer to the mother or father of a child. Incarcerated parents are defined as a mother or father who unable to provide care due to confinement to an institution. Paternal relatives include all biological family members and relatives by marriage or adoption.

Fathers, non-custodial parents, incarcerated parents and paternal kin shall be included in all case planning meetings, such as, but not limited to FIMs, case conferences, treatment teams, and court hearings. For relatives being explored as placement resources, the relatives shall also be included in school meetings and medical appointments. Relatives who are assessed to be family connections should be kept abreast of school and medical updates as part of case planning meetings they are invited to attend.

Child welfare supervisors should include a discussion about fathers, non-custodial parents, incarcerated parents and paternal kin as part of regular supervision with caseworkers to coordinate permanency planning and family connections. Caseworkers are prohibited from using social media to engage relatives. Cases requiring specialized search and engagement efforts should be referred to the Family Finder.

### ***In-Home Services Requirements***

During the initial assessment (CPS investigation, VPA Assessment or SFC Intake), in-home services caseworkers shall request and document the contact information for the father and paternal kin in addition to maternal relatives. The in-home caseworkers shall contact these relatives to engage them in the case planning decision making process for children receiving the child welfare intervention. For sibling groups with different fathers, this information shall be requested and documented for all of the children involved in the case.

If the parent is incarcerated, the caseworker is to contact the appropriate social worker within the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Corrections to initiate contact with the parent. The caseworker shall coordinate with the social worker at the institution time to schedule face-to-face contact with the incarcerated parent prior to completing the initial case plan. For parents who are incarcerated out-of-state, the caseworker shall contact the public safety entity in the state where the person is being detained. Arrangements should be made to keep the incarcerated parent abreast of all case activity. In advance of case planning meeting, attempts to coordinate the incarcerated parent's participation with the social worker at the institution should be documented.

If the custodial parent or caregiver is unable to provide information pertaining to the father, non-custodial parent, incarcerated parent or paternal kin, the in-home services caseworker shall initiate a search using tools such as, the absent parent locator, CIS clearances and inmate locators. All efforts to search and engage fathers, non-custodial parents, incarcerated parents and paternal relatives shall be documented in MD CHESSIE to support ongoing case management efforts when the case is transferred to out-of-home services.

### ***Out-of-Home Services Requirements***

The out-of-home caseworker shall follow-up with any relatives who were engaged by in-home services caseworkers. As new information about fathers, non-custodial parents, incarcerated parents and paternal relatives becomes available, the out-of-home caseworker shall conduct the same outreach efforts as the in-home services caseworkers. As the permanency options are explored, the out-of-home caseworker shall assess all viable options for identifying these relatives as quickly as possible so that appropriate assessment can be made to help achieve

timely permanency for children and youth. A referral to the Family Finder should be considered if the traditional search methods fail to yield any leads.

### ***Assessing and Managing Conflict Between Relatives***

Knowing that conflict exists in a particular familial relationship does not preclude the participation of a father, non-custodial parent, incarcerated parent and paternal kin; however, special consideration must be given to minimize potential risk and exposure to further trauma of the child or any other relatives involved with the case. The assessment shall ensure the safety and well-being of the child and other family members in addition to informing the case planning decisions. Referrals for supportive services, as appropriate, should be outlined in the service agreements to address these familial conflicts.

Provisions should be made to protect victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence. When court orders restrict contact between the relatives, the parties must be prohibited from attending the same case planning meetings. The caseworkers and supervisors are responsible for assessing risk and safety issues and developing an emergency contingency plan as a precaution. Accommodations should be made to include both parents in the decision making process unless the assessed threat poses a significant risk to the child or other parent.

### ***Family Involvement Meetings (FIMs)***

Each local department of social services shall ensure that staff invites fathers, non-custodial parents, incarcerated parents and paternal kin to participate as team members for Family Involvement Meetings (FIMs) for all triggers. The caseworker and supervisor shall ask parents and/or relatives for additional contact information for family members who are not able to attend the meeting. All of the contact information must be documented in MD CHESSIE. Provisions should be made for parents to attend separate meetings or include one parent on a conference call if there are known courts orders or circumstances that would prohibit their interaction with each other or the child

### ***Family Finding:***

Searching for relatives is a primary role for case managers. Family Finding is being implemented to expand the search resources for children without identified relative resources, such as fathers and paternal kin. The role of the Family Finder is to search for lost connections with fathers and paternal kin who may be willing to provide permanent placements or the emotional support of relational permanence. The Family Finder will assist the caseworker with locating fathers and paternal kin who may have previously been unaware or unable to be a resource for a child or youth in out-of-home care. The caseworker and supervisor will conduct

the appropriate clearances and make decisions about the appropriateness of pursuing placements or relationships with these identified fathers and paternal kin.

**MD CHESSIE Instructions:**

Refer to the March 9, 2009 memorandum entitled “Establishing Title IV-E eligibility in MD CHESSIE” for specific instructions to ensure appropriate documentation of fathers, non-custodial parents, incarcerated parents and paternal kin. The memorandum can be found on SSANet under Child Welfare Policies.