



LEVERAGING INTENSIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT (LIFE)
FINAL EVALUATION REPORT:
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Oregon's Department of Human Services - Child Welfare Program
University Partner: Portland State University's Child Welfare Partnership Research Team
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LIFE

LIFE EVALUATION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | VERSION 1.0

Oregon Department of Human Services-Child Welfare (DHS-CW) developed an intervention focused on reducing the time to permanency for children likely to have long-term stays in foster care. The intervention, known as Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE), had four key components and four practice values. LIFE staff consisted of a trained meeting facilitator (Family Engagement Facilitator, FEF), support staff (LIFE Coordinator, LC), and a paid peer parent mentor (PM).

The Portland State University's Child Welfare Partnership Research Team used a five-phase framework to evaluate the implementation LIFE services, its outcomes, and cost:

1. Developmental
2. Formative
3. Fidelity and Model Testing
4. Outcome
5. Wrap-Up

LIFE Components

- 1 Enhanced family finding
- 2 Family case planning meetings (LIFE Meetings)
- 3 Peer parent mentors (PMs)
- 4 Team collaboration

LIFE Values

- 1 Strengths-based
- 2 Trauma-informed
- 3 Culturally responsive
- 4 Parent-directed, youth-guided

SUMMARY OF KEY OUTCOMES

LIFE services promoted the following outcomes:

- Parent engagement, and to some degree youth involvement, in case planning and decision making.
- Exiting foster care to a parent or familial home within a year of completing LIFE services, proportional across racial groups.
- Increased likelihood of living with relatives at some point during foster care episode.

LIFE services largely worked according to the logic model and program theory of change:

- LIFE supported the development of a team, positive working relationships, and a sense of cohesion among team members.
- LIFE Meetings promoted transparency, clarity, and accountability, and provided action steps for all LIFE Team members.
- Parents, youth, relatives, and other members of the team had opportunities for input, choice, and participation in decision-making.

LIFE services had a number of unintended positive impacts:

- Use of the Oregon Safety Model in case planning and decision-making increased.
- Caseworkers received a variety of supports from FEFs and other LIFE Team members.

- Foster parents gained valuable information and insights about the children in their care as well as about how DHS works.
- There was a shift toward values-based practice by caseworkers and other service providers.
- LIFE service components were incorporated into other DHS meetings and processes (e.g., Transfer Protocol).

LIFE services were constrained by a variety of challenges:

- Implementation barriers included a lack of branch-level support; at times insufficient training, coaching, and supervision; turnover and hiring delays; and tensions between LIFE and business-as-usual processes.
- A small number of caseworkers and supervisors resisted LIFE services and/or otherwise hindered the positive effects of increased parent engagement and opportunities for support from the team.
- Leadership turnover, staffing shortages, and workload challenges in Oregon's child welfare system more broadly hindered implementation.
- Values-based practices were sometimes thwarted by the coercive or oppressive features of the child welfare system such as institutionalized racism. Youth-guided and cultural responsiveness were particularly challenging to operationalize and practice.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

The LIFE program's underlying assumption was that engaging parents, youth and extended family will lead to improved child welfare outcomes. LIFE envisioned collaboration between caseworkers, FEFs and Parent Mentors, and they are joined by service providers, attorneys and a range of informal supports on the LIFE Team. It is important to acknowledge that this work took place within a broader context that had a significant influence on the degree to which LIFE services could increase parent engagement and/or have a meaningful impact on more distal child welfare outcomes.

At the socially complex intersection of justice and welfare, child welfare is simultaneously seeking to preserve families, rescue children from inadequate or dangerous family contexts, and compel parents to change. Caseworkers are tasked with supporting families to find their own solutions while retaining responsibility for keeping children safe, which may hinder family-centered approaches. Moreover, institutional oppression and racism are realities for families interacting with the child welfare system, as evidenced by the over-representation of children of color, as well as disparities related to outcomes once in the system. Youth in foster care face trauma, exploitation, and other disadvantages disproportionate to their peers who don't come into contact with the child welfare system. In the face of these powerful institutional forces, one may question whether parent engagement, focused on individuals with very little power within the system, can truly drive child welfare case outcomes. Nevertheless, LIFE services and underlying practice values were intended to shift some of these power dynamics and the findings suggest that overall, LIFE services made progress toward that goal.





Process Evaluation Key Findings

The purpose of the LIFE process evaluation was to examine the factors that could explain how outcomes were achieved. To this end, the evaluation examined implementation, the degree to which the target population was identified and offered services, and the integrity of implementation. In addition, a realist approach was utilized to better understand the mechanisms by which LIFE services impacted short-, medium- and long-term outcomes.

IMPLEMENTATION

Following a 12-month staggered implementation plan, LIFE was fully implemented in all 4 districts/7 DHS-Child Welfare branches. Key implementation findings include:

Early support for implementation was successful but the effect waned over time.

Efforts by program leadership, Kick-Off events, and the development of branch-specific business protocols, encouraged buy-in by local staff early in the project. As districts started to implement LIFE services, the Waiver Program Manager and LIFE Consultants addressed workload and resource issues, managed contracts and communications, worked with community partners, coached LIFE staff, and promoted the use of the Oregon Safety Model (OSM). Branch-level supervisors did LIFE-specific case consultation and helped align LIFE processes. Over time, DHS staff turnover diminished the impact of these initial efforts and the responsibility for supporting LIFE Teams fell on LIFE Consultants and the Waiver Program Manager.

Turnover made it challenging to keep up with training, coaching, and supervision.

FEFs and LCs received initial formal training, supervision at their branch, and support from their district LIFE Consultant. PMs received training through their own community agency. LIFE staff also attended monthly district LIFE Team meetings and cross-district Quarterly Trainings. As LIFE staff turned over, it was difficult to provide ongoing formal training; for many, especially in the LC position, training was largely on-the-job and peer-to-peer. Turnover created gaps in service for families and workload burden for LIFE staff. It took a significant amount of time to hire positions and get new staff onboarded and trained. LIFE leadership created a clearer protocol for onboarding, but there was not always access to more formal training.

The fit between LIFE and branch processes and caseworker practice was

sometimes a challenge. Each branch adapted LIFE protocols to fit with local practice at the start of the program. This flexibility encouraged implementation but also resulted in some inconsistency in practice, especially around diligent relative search and enhanced family finding. Material supports, such as a dedicated meeting room and a conference phone, were more available in some branches than others. Other challenges were DHS staff concerns that LIFE cases required additional work or weren't productive, and getting accustomed to working in partnership with a meeting facilitator. It is significant that the practice values were specific to LIFE and not to the larger

agency; FEFs had to negotiate DHS staff resistance to the LIFE model, and often modeled values-based practice for their colleagues. LIFE Consultants and LIFE staff spent a great deal of time and energy throughout the demonstration building relationships and creating buy-in.

Community partners were important to the formation of LIFE Teams.

Community partners were part of the LIFE Team, and their presence was often crucial to the team's ability to do successful planning. Many service providers saw the benefits of LIFE services although it could be challenging to schedule meetings when everyone was available. Attorneys in some of the districts only rarely attended meetings; however, this reflected the local bar's decision regarding child welfare meetings more generally and was not specific to LIFE. The Waiver Program Manager and other LIFE staff worked to build relationships with community partners throughout the course of the demonstration.

IDENTIFIED & SERVED POPULATION

The process designed to identify and involve families in LIFE services generally worked well. Initially eligible youth were identified using a predictive algorithm; a second level screening happened at the branch. Due to the low threshold for initial eligibility, the number of eligible cases surpassed projections (the threshold was raised in February 2017 to slow case flow). After a case was determined eligible for LIFE services, caseworkers could make a PM referral for parents. Participation was voluntary; nearly 3 in 5 LIFE cases had at least one parent who accepted PM services.

INTEGRITY OF IMPLEMENTATION

LIFE, a complex human service intervention, does not lend itself to traditional notions of "fidelity," where every participant reliably gets the same set of services with the same intensity and duration. Integrity in implementation allows for services to be delivered according to essential core elements while being responsive to family needs, conditions, and local contexts. On the whole, practice was consistent with the LIFE model but was also affected by implementation issues and the larger child welfare context.

LIFE Meetings. LIFE staff documented 5,144 LIFE Meetings over the course of the demonstration. On average, families had 11 meetings over 13 months of service. The most consistent LIFE Meeting practices were related to meeting structure (e.g., following agenda), collaboration (e.g., problem solving, getting questions answered), and general meeting facilitation (e.g., reframing, using clear language). Caseworkers, parents, and service providers attended LIFE Meetings most consistently, and youth and legal representatives attended least consistently. Participants generally agreed that LIFE Meetings created a respectful environment focused on problem solving, and provided space for family voice. During LIFE Meetings, PMs helped clarify things for parents by asking questions and requesting information, provided parents with support and coaching, brought attention to the parent's strengths, and offered insight into a parent's experience for the rest of the team.

Practice Values. LIFE staff spent the first two years working to identify and document how to practice the four values included in the LIFE model. Over time, LIFE staff widely regarded practicing the values as more central to their work than some of the structural features of the LIFE model. Values-based practice was key to successful work with families. In addition, LIFE staff noticed how modeling for and practicing the values with other LIFE Team members, co-workers, and colleagues helped build a sense of cohesion and shifted practice. On the whole, LIFE staff were consistently strengths-based and trauma-informed and they endeavored to center parents in the face of competing agency practices (e.g., lack of transparency). Cultural responsiveness and youth-guided were more challenging to implement; indeed, these values are directly in conflict with institutionalized racism, oppression, and youth marginalization in the child welfare system.

Meeting Preparation. Parents and caseworkers received the most consistent meeting preparation. For parents, preparation routinely consisted of helping to decide who would be invited; being notified of the agenda, meeting logistics, and who was confirmed to attend; and being asked about preferences or concerns related to the meeting. Less consistent practices, at least in some branches, involved youth preparation (youth were also less likely to attend LIFE Meetings), and efforts toward cultural responsiveness during preparation.

Parent Mentors. PM services typically included attending pre-LIFE Meeting staffings, developing Individual Action Plans with parents, and discussing informed consent (an on-going way to promote parent autonomy). Somewhat less consistent were helping parents prepare for LIFE Meetings and following through on action items developed during meetings (these were partially dependent on how often meetings took place and whether parents were assigned action items). PMs also accompanied parents at child welfare meetings and court proceedings; provided transportation; helped find resources for permanent housing, basic needs, and A&D treatment and recovery; and supported visitation.

Team Collaboration. Family/support people who attended meetings largely reported that their LIFE Team worked together. Foster parents said they mostly felt included, and that LIFE Meetings were an opportunity for communication and coordination. Most caseworkers and service providers reported that they developed relationships with LIFE Team members and that meetings helped everyone get on the same page. In addition, pre-LIFE Meeting collaboration was most consistent between the FEF and caseworker, but PMs were also included in some pre-meetings.

Enhanced Family Finding. The LIFE model specified that enhanced family finding was to start with diligent relative search, followed by additional database searches and ongoing conversations with parents and youth about their family and other supports. There was a great deal of variation in practice across branches. Not only were business processes different, but also what enhanced family finding entailed was understood differently across different districts/branches. Rising caseloads and turnover, especially at the LC position, often meant that enhanced family finding was deprioritized by LIFE staff, despite the fact that the LIFE Model Refresh in 2017 mandated a renewed focus on the practice.

Overall, LIFE components and underlying practice values worked together to create a supportive, motivationally rich context that not only promoted parent engagement, but also LIFE Team engagement in support of families. Findings suggest that the benefits of having a team are far reaching, not just for families but also for caseworkers and others. Of central importance were monthly meetings, which gave LIFE Teams opportunities over time to develop a sense of cohesion, shared purpose, and efficacy. Meetings were instrumental to parents' ability to make progress on the issues that brought them to the attention of child welfare. The practice values, especially cultural responsiveness and youth-guided, both enabled and complicated this work as they came in conflict with each other and constraints of the child welfare system.



Outcome Evaluation Key Findings

The outcome evaluation assessed program effectiveness in producing change. LIFE services most powerfully influenced family engagement, with longer-term effects on timely case progress and relative foster placements.

PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Parents generally participated in LIFE Meetings along with their caseworkers and FEFs, while other LIFE Team members attended more sporadically. Although scheduling was often a barrier, service providers attended based on the current needs of the case. Consistent attendance by caseworkers and family/youth was associated with parents feeling motivated and that they were making progress, suggesting the importance of informal and familial support as well as investment from caseworkers. Service navigation from Parent Mentors (meeting parents' needs for A&D treatment/recovery, education/vocational school, and housing) was also associated with parent motivation.

LIFE services promoted parents' engagement in decision making, services, and other activities related to their case. Meetings that were strengths-based and productive engendered confidence and hope. When parents had an opportunity to express their needs and participate in planning, they developed a sense of ownership and investment in their case plan. Monthly meetings also provided clear and timely information as well as frequent check-ins and problem solving; as a result, parents understood what they needed to do and how to get it done. These processes were bolstered by a welcoming, supportive team; regular meeting preparation; and Parent Mentor advocacy. LIFE services were also useful for parents facing significant challenges (e.g., housing instability, relapse), or who were incarcerated or unlikely to be reunified. In these cases, LIFE services gave parents an opportunity to engage when they otherwise may have been left out, or more easily facilitated re-engagement after a setback.

At times LIFE services fell short. Despite the best efforts of LIFE staff, child welfare system power dynamics impinged on LIFE services in a number of ways. Some meetings were not particularly strengths-based. At times, caseworkers used LIFE Meetings as a forum to inform or confront the parent rather than for dialogue and soliciting their input. Caseworkers used coercive tactics like withholding information or refusing to answer certain questions. Parents were not likely to continue attending meetings under these circumstances, and if they did, they felt silenced and powerless, and often hopeless, angry and distrustful. Parent engagement was also profoundly complicated by institutionalized racism and the marginalization of families of color. Although LIFE staff endeavored to provide culturally responsive services, some parents of color experienced ruptures (e.g., racialized experiences of being othered, microaggressions) related to their cultural identity and beliefs, language and communication, and the provision (or lack thereof) of culturally appropriate services.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

LIFE Meetings helped promote engagement in case planning for parents, but engaging youth was significantly more complicated. Overall youth attended 1 in 3 LIFE Meetings. Youth-centered meetings occurred when parents were not actively involved or if the concurrent plan was independent living. Youth wanted to be able to decide whether to attend family meetings, and if not, they wanted other opportunities to be involved. Findings suggest that youth involvement was more likely when FEFs, caseworkers, and service providers invested in and were responsive to youth and their families. Relationships helped youth figure out and articulate what they wanted and needed. When LIFE services afforded opportunities to receive information, provide input, participate in decision-making, and make choices, youth experienced a sense of control, emotional support, and hope for the future. In the child welfare system, adults make decisions in the best interest of youth, which often silences their voices and takes away their power. Involving youth in case planning requires an approach that is different from parents, but involvement is critical for youth well-being.

CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES

The purpose of LIFE was to speed case progress in order to shorten the amount of time youth spent in foster care; to partner with families to plan, monitor, and problem solve so that youth placements were stable; and to maintain familial ties through relative foster placements and family meetings. Findings suggest that LIFE services promoted timely case progress and relative placements, but did not decrease time spent in foster care nor positively impact placement stability.

Timely Case Progress. Moving cases through the child welfare system is one indicator of how well the system works for families, and plays a key role in foster care outcomes. LIFE services facilitated timely progress by improving decision-making and case planning (e.g., more consistent use of Oregon Safety Model), increasing support for caseworkers, and promoting engagement among caseworkers and other providers. In addition, LIFE services kept cases on track and facilitated clear communication regarding the agency's expectations of parents such as conditions for return.

Permanency. Within 12 months of completing LIFE services, nearly 3 in 4 youth had exited foster care and the majority of them had been returned to their parent(s) or legally placed with guardians (mostly relatives). For the most part, LIFE services were closed because permanent plans were in place, but the time it took to do so widely varied (from 1 day to 3.7 years). Results for youth with closed LIFE services were promising in that most youth entered and remained in a family-focused permanent placement. Furthermore, there was a proportional distribution of permanent placements (e.g., reunification, relative guardianship) across racial groups (Hispanic, Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, White).

When comparing LIFE youth to similar youth who had not received LIFE services, LIFE youth (family had at least two LIFE Meetings, or minimum service) were more likely to have lived with a relative at some point during their foster care episode. Subsequent analyses suggested this was even more likely for White LIFE youth.

Within two years of the LIFE eligibility date, LIFE youth were less likely than Comparison youth to return to foster care if they had been in a permanent placement. However, this outcome in the two-year timeframe was challenging to interpret given most youth were still in foster care so outcomes were artificially cut off at the two-year mark. Similarly, return to care estimates were based on a small number of youth who had achieved a permanent placement and were not necessarily representative of the full sample.

After three years, Comparison and LIFE youth had a similar return to foster care rate – LIFE youth “caught up” to Comparison youth. Another trend was that LIFE youth were less likely to have exited foster care, although LIFE youth still in care were slightly more likely to have been living with relatives. Again, these findings were based on a subset of youth: only half of the total matched sample had three years of follow-up time and the last site was excluded due to the staggered implementation rollout.

Youth of Color in child welfare. Youth of Color (YOC) and their families face institutionalized racism, implicit bias, marginalization, and microaggressions on a daily basis in the United States. Consistent with much of the published data on disproportionality for YOC in the child welfare system, findings indicate that YOC (Black youth in particular) had more placements and placement changes, a higher rate of return to foster care, and a lower likelihood of exiting foster care than White youth. On the other hand, YOC had fewer days in foster care and greater likelihood of reunification compared to White youth within two years of LIFE eligibility. Generally speaking, findings suggest that LIFE services were not enough to neutralize the oppressive nature of the child welfare system for many YOC, although they may have played a positive role, especially earlier on in the case, for some. The results also speak to the heterogeneity and complexity of the experiences of YOC.

Youth of Color with LIFE services. The effect of LIFE on foster care outcomes was similar for White youth and YOC, with one exception. At the end of the study window, LIFE YOC had an average of one more placement change than White youth. However, Black LIFE youth experienced a number of differences compared to Black Comparison and White LIFE youth: they were less likely to have exited foster care, spent more days in foster care, and had more placements. It is hard to interpret these results with so many confounding factors, but previously documented disproportionality for Black youth in the child welfare system underscores the gravity of these findings. Likewise, it is noteworthy that outcomes for AI/AN LIFE youth were more similar to White LIFE youth.

Defining particular foster care outcomes as “bad” and “good” is an oversimplification of what actually happens for families. It is also important to acknowledge that administrative data is quite limited in what it can tell us about what is good for families. Here, the mostly null findings could be interpreted as the LIFE program didn’t work, or that families had mixed outcomes that averaged out to appear as no treatment effect, or that administrative data tell the story of an “average” youth that doesn’t exist rather than the stories of real individuals in complicated circumstances.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES AT STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS

The LIFE intervention's influence reached beyond the families who received LIFE services. Caseworkers received support related to the Oregon Safety Model, knowledge which they undoubtedly utilized in their work with non-LIFE cases. FEFs modeled values-based practices for both caseworkers and service providers, and meetings helped foster parents gain a detailed understanding of DHS decision-making including the constraints and challenges facing caseworkers.

There were also impacts at the state level. LIFE Meetings served as the model for the redesign of Child Safety Meetings that were widely considered not particularly conducive to engaging families. The LIFE model was the basis for Oregon's new statewide transfer protocol, which calls for Child Protective Services and Permanency workers to co-manage cases in partnership with parents. The transfer protocol also requires the use of a skilled meeting facilitator for the new Family Engagement Meetings, and LIFE staff have trained the meeting facilitators statewide. In addition, the state legislature authorized funding for LIFE services through the 2019-2020 biennium, and a values-based meeting facilitation program is growing statewide. Finally, Parent Mentors continue to support this work with their experiences shaping how DHS staff partner with families.



Cost Study Key Findings

The general cost comparison (average service cost per child for LIFE vs. comparison youth) suggested that there was no overall difference in cost for youth with families who received at least two LIFE Meetings compared to a matched comparison group. Although overall costs were similar, the mix of costs for LIFE youth was different. Specifically, LIFE youth had higher costs associated with residential placements, relative foster care, and independent living programs (ILP), and lower costs associated with non-relative foster care. A cost-effectiveness analysis was not conducted because youth receiving LIFE services did not experience reduced days in foster care.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The LIFE model was successful in promoting engagement, facilitating case progress, and encouraging relative placements. The following are program implications and recommendations for LIFE services going forward.

Value-based practice is central. In complex environments in which there is not one “right” answer and participants have multiple, competing objectives, LIFE values served as guideposts for practice.

Key recommendations:

- Continue training and peer-to-peer learning about practicing LIFE values.
- Enhance the conceptualization of cultural responsiveness to include practitioner self-awareness and an understanding that culture is essential to engagement and case planning.
- Reconceptualize the youth-guided value to specify relationship building and empowerment with the goal of youth well-being.

Importance of the team. In addition to parents and extended family, LIFE services facilitated the engagement of caseworkers and other service providers.

Key recommendations:

- Continue support and training for team building; encourage practicing the values with caseworkers and service providers in parallel process with families.
- Continue efforts to build partnerships with service providers and the legal community.

Importance of multiple meetings. Regular structured meetings that are solution-focused and strengths-based foster the development of relationships and build momentum for progress.

Key recommendations:

- Continue multiple meetings over time, ideally without restrictions on number or length of time.
- Continue to fund non-case carrying FEF positions and LC positions to support FEFs.

Need for leadership support. To manage and sustain the LIFE model, leadership at multiple levels (management, supervisors) must value family meeting practice.

Key recommendations:

- Management should establish and communicate expectations for family-centered practice among staff and create accountability.
- Supervisors should promote self-reflective practices related to LIFE values, support FEFs in working with caseworkers, and promote the practice among DHS staff.

CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE AND POLICY

The LIFE evaluation surfaced a number of practices that would be generally useful for the child welfare system. The following are child welfare practice and policy recommendations:

Team-oriented service delivery. A team approach to service delivery has benefits for families and the child welfare workforce alike. Teams bring multiple perspectives, ideas for problem solving, and resources to more effectively meet a family's needs. Caseworkers are supported when teams provide information for decision making, help paint a fuller picture of the family, and take on some of the work.

Key recommendations:

- Re-think service delivery models that rely on individuals working in isolation and incorporate team approaches.
- Support the development of teams, and use LIFE practice values to build cohesion and shared purpose.

Emphasize social justice. LIFE services were constrained by institutionalized racism and oppression present in the child welfare system.

Key recommendations:

- Put in place structures to support the integration of social justice principles into child welfare practice (e.g., adopt anti-racism and anti-bias frameworks, anti-oppressive practice values).
- Hire and support staff with social justice values; provide ongoing training, expectations, and opportunities for self-reflection related to race, equity, and inclusion.

Do youth engagement work differently. Youth deserve to be involved in their case planning, but asking them to attend an adult-focused meeting is not the best way.

Key recommendations:

- Prioritize and create accountability structures for DHS staff to develop relationships with youth.
- Provide training and supervision to help DHS staff understand power dynamics related to youth in foster care and developmentally appropriate practice approaches.

Developed by the Center for the Improvement of Child & Family Services in partnership with the Oregon Department of Human Services-Child Welfare as part of the Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE) Title IV-Waiver Demonstration Project March 2020

Learn more at www.pdx.edu/ccf/child-welfare | Contact: Carrie J. Furrer, cfurrer@pdx.edu