

# **A Stakeholder's Guide to Pre-Hearing Conferences**

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## **Legal Disclaimer**

This guide does not provide legal advice or opinion and is not intended to do so. It only conveys general information regarding pre-hearing conferences (PHCs) in Montana dependent neglect (DN) cases.

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## THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to help stakeholders understand and effectively engage in pre-hearing conferences, known as PHCs. Stakeholders may include attorneys, Child Protection Investigators, Child Reunification Specialists, parents or guardians, involved children, and special advocates. Special advocates could be court-appointed special advocates (CASAs) or guardians ad litem (GALs).

It is also intended for anyone interested in learning about the Montana pre-hearing conference process.

We hope this guide will provide you with the information you need to actively participate in pre-hearing conferences as a stakeholder.

***For more information about PHCs, please visit the Montana Court Improvement Program (CIP) website at [cip.mt.gov](http://cip.mt.gov), where you can find a link to eLearning guides, including one specifically designed for stakeholders on PHCs.***

## PRE-HEARING CONFERENCE (PHC) BASICS

PHCs are typically the parties' first chance to talk about key issues in Montana dependent neglect (DN) cases. PHCs aim to foster meaningful discussions on these important topics while building trust among the parties and participants.

When PHCs are held early in a DN case, all parties generally seek family reunification, except in the most serious situations. Therefore, it is a great opportunity to assemble a team of parties and participants ("participants" is a broader term that can include anyone involved in a legal proceeding, including the parties, but is not limited to them) to develop a family plan. Ideally, productive discussions will continue and expand throughout DN cases, building on the initial groundwork established during PHCs.

Facilitators conduct PHCs by providing structure to the discussions. They remain neutral and objective. The Office of the Court Administrator (OCA) trains and pays the PHC facilitators for their services. The facilitators do not work for or represent any of the parties or other participants, including the Montana Child and Family Services Division (CFSD). A PHC facilitator's role is to ensure the parties and participants are respectful of each other while fostering an open and neutral environment. They assist the parties and participants with their discussions, guiding them in designing and beginning to develop plans to reunite families.

Initially, the parties try to determine whether the children can return home immediately. They also discuss what has happened since the children's removal from their home. If the children cannot return home right away, the participants will talk about where the children will live, what family time and visitation will look like, and what services will support the family so the children can return home safely.

PHCs focus on conversations about the critical topics of placement of the children, family time, services for the family, and what needs to happen for the children to return home. Sometimes, the professionals involved use the term “conditions of return” to describe what must occur for children to return home. However, facilitators try to avoid this term because it can confuse the parties and participants.

Finally, the parties discuss their positions regarding the upcoming court hearings. They may also talk about the case timeline, including the schedule for future hearings and any relevant deadlines.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHCs IN MONTANA**

### **The Pre-Hearing Conference Pilot Court Era (2013-2023)**

In Montana, PHCs began in 2013 with a pilot court project in Yellowstone County, led by Judge Ingrid Gustafson, who is now a Montana Supreme Court Justice. Experienced personnel from an established Pima County, Arizona PHC program provided initial training. During that pilot court project, PHCs quickly expanded to other courtrooms in Yellowstone County.

In 2015, the Montana Court Improvement Program (CIP) replicated the PHC pilot court project in Lewis and Clark, Flathead, and Gallatin counties. PHCs later expanded to Butte-Silver Bow, Cascade, Park, and Sweet Grass counties, as well as the Fifth and Seventh judicial districts. Similar conferences called “Intervention Conferences” have been held in Missoula County for many years, predating the PHC pilot courts in Montana.

The PHC pilot court project sought to improve outcomes and timelines for dependency and neglect (DN) cases. These objectives were reached through a collaborative team approach involving PHC facilitators, child protection specialists (CPS) from the Montana Child and Family Services Division (CFSD), attorneys from multiple County Attorney’s Offices and the Attorney General’s Office, guardians ad litem (GAL), court appointed special advocates (CASA), tribal representatives, attorneys for parents and children, and, perhaps most importantly, parents.

PHCs during the pilot court era were set before the first court appearance. At that time, show cause hearings were typically the initial court appearances. Show cause hearings were held within 20 days of the filing of the initial petition and affidavit. Thus, PHCs were generally scheduled about 20 days after a DN case was filed in a Montana District Court or about 27 days after a child’s removal.

Beginning in 2020, in addition to PHCs, some existing PHC pilot courts in Yellowstone and Flathead counties started testing earlier initial court hearings called emergency protective services (EPS) hearings. During EPS hearings, courts determined whether children could return home immediately or soon through a safety plan. They also covered many of the same critical topics as PHCs, including the children’s placement, family time, and services for the family.

EPS hearings were scheduled within five business days of the children's removal. PHCs in those specific pilot courts were held shortly before the EPS hearings. Thus, PHCs in the Yellowstone and Flathead County pilot courtrooms were being held much earlier than before.

### **Statewide PHCs and EPS Hearings (began July 1, 2023)**

In 2021, Dr. Alicia Summers from the Capacity Building Center for Courts completed a study of the PHC pilot court project. The study used data from Flathead, Gallatin, and Lewis and Clark counties, which were the original PHC pilot court sites for CIP. Data was collected from DN cases filed between 2014 and 2018. DN case outcomes were compared between the period before the pilot project, when no PHCs were held, and the period during the pilot court project, when PHCs were conducted.

The study found that significantly more children were reunited with their parent or parents when a PHC was conducted. There was a 9% higher rate of reunification of children with their parent or parents when a PHC was held.

The study also revealed that DN cases were resolved much faster when PHCs were used. On average, cases reached permanency nearly two months earlier with PHCs.

Between the 2021 and 2023 legislative sessions, interim legislative committees and workgroups focused on issues related to DN cases and child welfare in Montana. In an effort to improve the process, and partly due to the success of the PHC and EPS hearing pilot projects, the Montana Legislature passed a bill during the 2023 session to establish statewide PHCs and EPS hearings within five days of a child's removal from their home. The Governor signed that bill into law on July 1, 2023.

Thus, the pilot court era of PHCs and EPS hearings concluded, and they became a standard part of Montana DN cases. The earlier scheduling of PHCs and the inclusion of EPS hearings have significantly improved the initial due process for Montana DN cases by creating a procedure to discuss key issues and a potential return of children home within a few days of their removal.

### **2025 Legislation**

During the 2025 legislative session, several bills were enacted into law, affecting DN cases overall. Two bills, in particular, directly affect PHCs.

Senate Bill (SB) 17, effective July 1, 2025, clarifies that PHCs should be scheduled before EPS hearings within five working or business days of removal. Since weekends and holidays are not counted as working or business days under Montana law, PHCs can be held about a week after a child's removal. EPS hearings also occur within five business or working days of removal, so PHCs can be scheduled immediately before an EPS hearing or within a few days earlier.

Senate Bill (SB) 73, effective October 1, 2025, clarifies that a PHC must be held before an EPS hearing. The language is clear and straightforward. It also states that a parent, guardian, or other person having custody of a child must be included in a PHC. However, these individuals can decide whether or not to participate. A PHC will happen with or without them. Previously, a

few jurisdictions interpreted the 2023 law as requiring parents and other caregivers to request a PHC before one could be scheduled. This new law should make it crystal clear that PHCs must be held before EPS hearings. No one should need to request one.

SB 73 adds PHC facilitators to the list of individuals and entities that must be notified within 24 hours of a child's removal. In practice, the notification should be sent to the statewide PHC Scheduler, who then contacts the facilitators responsible for conducting PHCs in a specific jurisdiction.

SB 73 adds children's attorneys to the list of individuals who must be included in PHCs. A 2023 law requires that attorneys be appointed for all children in DN cases. Previously, the courts had discretion to decide whether a child needed an attorney. That judicial discretion no longer exists. Children's attorneys should be active participants in PHCs.

## **THE PRE-HEARING CONFERENCE (PHC) APPROACH**

**Pre-hearing conferences seek to develop safe plans for reunifying families while also minimizing adverse impacts on families and children. The following section describes the purpose, parties, participants, and goals of PHCs.**

### **Purpose of PHCs**

The purpose of a pre-hearing conference is to discuss critical topics early in DN cases before the initial court appearance. Since July 2023, an emergency protective services (EPS) hearing has been the first court date. During an EPS hearing, the judge primarily determines whether the children will remain out of their home.

***For more information about EPS hearings, please visit the Montana Court Improvement Program (CIP) website at [cip.mt.gov](http://cip.mt.gov), where you can find a link to eLearning guides, including one specifically designed for stakeholders that provides detailed information on EPS hearings.***

PHCs enable the parties and other stakeholders to plan and prepare for challenging tasks before heading to court. Facilitators focus on building trust by promoting open discussions. Trained PHC facilitators oversee the process to ensure all parties have an equal voice and that everyone can speak openly and honestly. Judges do not take part in PHCs.

If the children cannot return home immediately, the primary purpose of PHCs is to discuss the following essential topics:

- **Placement of children**, or where they will live,
- **Family time and visitation** between children, parents, and extended family or kin,
- **Services for the family**, including parents and children, and
- **What needs to happen for the children to return home immediately, soon, or later** (Conditions of Return)

### **Parties and Participants**

Parties, participants, and their representatives are encouraged to attend and collaborate during PHCs. PHCs aim to build a team that works together to create a safe home for the children to return to. All relevant parties should be present and actively participate in PHCs whenever possible. Support persons for parents and extended family are encouraged to attend, as they can often assist with family reunification. Hopefully, they will continue to support the family after the DN cases are dismissed.

Parties, however, may request that a non-party participant be excluded from PHCs. If such a request is made, everyone must respect that decision. Non-party friends, family, or treatment providers can offer support and valuable insights if allowed to participate. However, they can sometimes be disruptive or inappropriate.

The following individuals, including parties and participants, are encouraged to actively participate in PHCs:

- **Parents, guardians, or other custodians of children**
- **Child Protection Investigators and Child Reunification Specialists from the Montana Child and Family Services Division (CFSD)**
- **Attorneys for the state, parents, and children**
- **Special Advocates, including Guardians ad Litem (GAL) and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)**
- **Tribal representatives** (if it is an ICWA case or potentially an ICWA case)
- **Resource parents** (sometimes referred to as Foster Parents)
- **Children** (if they are developmentally ready)
- **Family members and friends** (if permitted by parties)
- **Service and treatment providers** (if permitted by parties)

### **Goals for PHCs**

PHCs seek to build trust between the parties, encouraging them to develop an initial plan for how children can safely return home. They aim to engage the parties, increase reunification rates, and shorten the time needed to resolve DN cases. PHCs foster an environment where the parties and participants can speak openly and honestly about the children's best interests, safety concerns, and potential remedies for those issues. The discussion should shift from adversarial stances toward a more collaborative team approach. Ideally, these conversations will continue throughout a DN case and beyond, leading to children returning to and remaining in safe and healthy homes.



## **HOW ARE PHCs SCHEDULED?**

### **Timing**

PHCs should be held within five working or business days after children are removed from their homes and before emergency protective services (EPS) hearings. MCA 41-3-307. EPS hearings are initial court hearings also scheduled within five working or business days of removals. MCA 41-3-306. Working or business days under Montana law do not include weekends or holidays. PHCs typically last about 30 minutes, but they can be longer if more time is available. Due to time constraints, some PHCs may need to be shorter, although this is not ideal.

The scheduling process is most effective when a jurisdiction designates at least two fixed days each workweek, spaced at least one day apart. A PHC and EPS hearing can be scheduled on these days if children are removed from their homes during the preceding days. This approach helps Child Protection Investigators, Child Reunification Specialists, attorneys, PHC facilitators, and the court plan ahead, knowing that PHCs and EPS hearings might be scheduled on these predetermined days with minimal notice.

### **Notice**

Unfortunately, current Montana law does not establish a formal process for notifying the courts, PHC facilitators, attorneys, and parties about the necessity, timing, and location or remote video conference link for PHCs and EPS hearings. Formal service of process is not required and is unlikely because of the limited time. As a result, there may be slight differences in how PHCs are scheduled across various jurisdictions. As a stakeholder in DN cases, you are encouraged to participate in developing sustainable procedures for scheduling and conducting PHCs and EPS hearings in the jurisdictions you serve.

### **PHC Scheduler**

The position of PHC Scheduler was established shortly after the statewide PHC and EPS hearing laws took effect on July 1, 2023. The PHC Scheduler should be notified promptly when a child is removed from their home and a PHC is required. They then communicate with the PHC facilitators about the need for a PHC in their jurisdiction. A facilitator is chosen to conduct the PHC. All jurisdictions in Montana should follow this procedure. The PHC Scheduler must be informed so a PHC facilitator can be assigned. Without this notification, a facilitator might not be available to prepare for and lead the PHC. A PHC is unlikely to happen if the scheduler is unaware of the need for one.

The Montana Office of Court Administrator (OCA) employs Chase Rosario as the statewide PHC Scheduler. She ensures PHC facilitators are assigned to lead PHCs and ensures they have the necessary documents to prepare for and conduct PHCs effectively. As the PHC Scheduler, Chase Rosario can be contacted through her state email at [chase.rosario@mt.gov](mailto:chase.rosario@mt.gov).

Please include the PHC Scheduler in any plans to develop or adjust the notification and scheduling process for PHCs in your jurisdictions. Her inclusion will ensure facilitators are informed and prepared to conduct PHCs. The PHC Scheduler brings her experience and knowledge as an attorney and former facilitator from various jurisdictions to the discussion. She is an invaluable resource and helps maintain a consistent notification process for PHCs across Montana.

As a stakeholder, you might also learn about upcoming PHCs through informal communications from a Child Protection Investigator, Child Reunification Specialist, the County Attorney's or Attorney General's Office, or the Office of the State Public Defender (OPD). If you get informal notification of the need for a PHC, please contact the PHC Scheduler immediately to ensure she is also aware as soon as possible.

### **Location**

PHCs are most often conducted remotely through online video conferences, usually using a Zoom link. PHC facilitators have dedicated Zoom links for this purpose. Attorneys must make sure their clients receive this link and the scheduled time for the PHC so they can actively participate. Remote video PHCs are frequently necessary because of the limited time available to schedule PHCs and the need for attorneys and other participants to be available with minimal notice.

Some jurisdictions hold in-person PHCs in an open jury or conference room at the District Court. Sometimes, vacant courtrooms are also used. In-person PHCs are held at the courthouse because it is a neutral location. They are not scheduled in the Montana Child and Family Services Division's (CFSD) offices since CFSD is a party to the DN case.

### **PHC Fact Sheet**

There have been challenges while implementing PHCs statewide. To improve the process, a fact sheet explaining how to make PHCs run more efficiently was created and shared. The next two pages feature a brief fact sheet developed by the Montana Court Improvement Program and the Court Administrator's Office, recommending best practices for scheduling PHCs across Montana. This fact sheet is based on lessons learned during the past few years of PHC implementation. It has already been distributed to some stakeholders across the state, including judges, attorneys, and CFSD. Feel free to share a copy of the fact sheet with anyone who needs it, as they might have forgotten about it, or new stakeholders may have joined.

***If you would like laminated copies of the fact sheet, please contact Julie Burk at the Court Improvement Program at [jb Burk3@mt.gov](mailto:jb Burk3@mt.gov).***

## **PRE-HEARING CONFERENCE (PHC) FACT SHEET**

### **(2025 version)**

Pre-hearing conferences (PHCs) must occur when a child has been removed from their home in a DN case. *SB 73 (2025); MCA 41-3-307(1)*.

PHCs must be held within five working days of the child's removal and before the emergency protective services (EPS) hearing. *SB 17 (2025); MCA 41-3-307(1)*. A parent, guardian, or other custodian can choose whether they want to participate in the PHC. *SB 73 (2025); MCA 41-3-307(2)*. The EPS hearing is also required to occur within five business or working days of removal. *SB 17 (2025); MCA 41-3-301(1); MCA 41-3-306(1)*.

PHCs work best in districts that have preset days and times. Reserving at least two days and times a week is best, with a minimum of one day between them. This ensures a PHC can be held within five working days of removal.

To ensure the process for scheduling PHCs is efficient, the following three steps should be taken:

1. At or before the removal, the Department emails their attorney, OPD (at [opdeps@mt.gov](mailto:opdeps@mt.gov)), the Court, Special Advocates (CASA/GAL), and the PHC Scheduler to notify them of the removal. By law, PHC facilitators and OPD must receive notification of a child's removal within 24 hours of the removal. *SB 73 (2025); MCA 41-3-301(1)*.
2. The PHC Scheduler, who has previously been provided with the preset days and times each jurisdiction sets aside for PHCs, locates a PHC facilitator and confirms that person's availability. At the same time, the judge or clerk of court sets the EPS hearing, and OPD appoints counsel for the children and parents. *MCA-41-3-425*.
3. The PHC Scheduler sends a second email to the Department and their attorney, Special Advocates (CASA/GAL), and OPD with the name and Zoom link of the facilitator assigned to the PHC.

The purpose of a PHC is to talk about important issues related to parents, guardians, other custodians and their children early in a child abuse and neglect case, with the goal of beginning to work as a team towards reunifying the family.

PHCs should address four main issues:

1. Placement – are parents, guardians, and other custodians okay with their children's current placement? If not, are there relatives or friends who might be appropriate?
2. Family time – can family time be improved or increased? How much supervision is needed to keep the children safe?
3. Services/treatment for parents, guardians, other custodians, and family – what services are needed for parents and their children, and will parents agree to begin them?
4. Conditions of return – can the children safely return home now? If not, what must be done before that can occur?

## WHAT HAPPENS DURING A PRE-HEARING CONFERENCE?

A pre-hearing conference is not a court hearing. It should not look, sound, or feel like one. PHCs are a discussion between the parties and participants, aimed at developing a plan for children to return home safely and as quickly as possible.

### Introductions

At the beginning of PHCs, facilitators introduce themselves as neutral, objective, and paid by the Office of the Court Administrator. They make it clear they do not work for any of the parties. Specifically, they tell the parties and participants that they are not employed by CFSD. Parents sometimes mistakenly believe facilitators are employed by CFSD or another party. It is important for them to understand facilitators are impartial and serve only the courts.

Initially, PHC facilitators establish some ground rules. They try to ensure everyone respects each other and listens. Facilitators may need to revisit these rules as a PHC progresses to remind everyone to remain civil. The topics discussed during a PHC can be challenging and frustrating for all involved. Only one person should speak at a time. The facilitator strives to create a level playing field for all parties and participants so everyone's voice can be heard.

Parents are welcomed and thanked for participating. Addressing parents directly and early on, and expressing gratitude for their time and involvement, helps to better engage them in the process. Studies have shown that when parents are actively engaged in PHC conversations, children are more likely to be reunited with one or both parents.

A PHC's purpose and process are briefly explained to all parties and participants. While professionals will become familiar with PHCs, it is likely a new concept for parents. Spending a few moments clarifying the process can help parents better understand the nature of these conversations. A non-parent stakeholder's effort to explain the PHC's purpose and approach to parents beforehand can significantly improve the quality of PHCs. The Court Improvement Program (CIP) has developed a brochure to explain the basics of PHCs to parents. Hopefully, these brochures are being given to parents by Child Protective Investigators or Child Reunification Specialists at the time of children's removal. Feel free to give a copy of the PHC brochure to anyone who needs one.

***For a copy of the PHC brochure, please visit the Montana Court Improvement Program (CIP) website at [cip.mt.gov](http://cip.mt.gov), where you will find an electronic copy of the PHC brochure through the PHC's link. If you would like to have physical copies of the brochure, please contact Julie Burk at [jburk3@mt.gov](mailto:jburk3@mt.gov).***

Parties and participants are asked to introduce themselves and describe their roles. For instance, a person might say they are a child's mother, a Child Protection Investigator, or an attorney for the father. If necessary, parties or participants may need to explain their roles. A special advocate, like a guardian ad litem (GAL) or court appointed special advocate (CASA),

may need to clarify their role as the children's best interest advocate and what that entails. Additionally, a parent may wonder why there is both a Child Protection Investigator and a Child Reunification Specialist. Providing a brief explanation of each person's specific roles can be very helpful.

During in-person PHCs, attendance sheets are circulated. Parties and participants are asked to print their names, sign, and specify their roles. PHC facilitators record attendance during remote video conference PHCs because people are not physically present to sign the sheet. The facilitator explains that signing the attendance sheet or participating in a remote video PHC does not indicate agreement with the discussions. Their presence is simply being noted. However, a primary goal of PHCs is for the parties to reach agreements on important topics whenever possible.

### **Initial Questions**

Some items must be addressed before discussing the key topics of children's placement, family time and visitation, services for the family, and what needs to happen before children can safely return home. These initial discussions lay the foundation for those important conversations.

PHC facilitators must verify whether the Child Protection Investigator and Child Reunification Specialist are present. Their presence is crucial. Child Protection Investigators typically have the most information about the initial status of DN cases since they were involved in the children's removal and may have taken part in early investigations. In contrast, Child Reunification Specialists will need to focus on the reunification plans being developed during PHCs, as they will oversee those plans moving forward.

PHC facilitators must determine whether all parties and their representatives are present. If not, they need to find out whether the missing individuals can be contacted by phone or video conference during a PHC. Most importantly, the facilitator must confirm that all parents, guardians, or custodians are there. If any are absent, the facilitator should try to find out why. For example, there could be an unknown father or an inability to contact a parent within the available time. If a parent is unknown or missing, this is a good opportunity to gather as much information as possible about that parent, including their location and how to contact them. In cases of unknown fathers, the names of potential fathers should be discussed.

### **Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and Montana Indian Child Welfare Act (MICWA)**

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and the Montana Indian Child Welfare Act (MICWA) establish higher standards for required state actions and judicial reviews when Indian children and their families are involved in DN cases. An "Indian child," as defined by ICWA and MICWA, is a child under the age of 18 who is a member of a federally recognized Tribe or eligible for membership in such a Tribe and has a biological parent who is a member. 25 U.S.C. § 1903(4); MCA 41-3-1303(8).

ICWA was enacted in 1978 because of long-standing discriminatory practices against Indian children and their families, which led to Indian children being removed from their homes, Tribes, and cultures at a much higher rate than other children.

Although the removal rate has declined, Indian children in Montana still face a higher likelihood of being removed from their homes than other children. Therefore, ICWA and MICWA require the state to make greater efforts to prevent the removal of Indian children and to promote family reunification. 25 U.S.C. § 1912(d); MCA 41-3-1319(1).

Indian children's Tribes have the right to participate in Montana DN cases and can choose to intervene as a party. Under certain circumstances, a case may be transferred to the appropriate Tribal Court. 25 U.S.C. § 1911(b); MCA 41-3-1310(3). ICWA and MICWA also establish placement preferences for where Indian children should live if removed from their homes. 25 U.S.C. § 1915; MCA 41-3-1329. Therefore, it is crucial to identify children's ICWA status early in a DN case before placement in foster care.

During PHCs, facilitators will ask whether a determination has been made regarding the children's ICWA status. Are the children considered Indian children as defined by ICWA and MICWA? About a third of Montana foster children are Native Americans, making this an important question to ask during a PHC.

If a decision has already been made regarding ICWA status, the facilitator will inquire about the basis for that decision. They will want to know whether the children's Tribe or potential Tribes have been notified about the PHC and DN case in general. Tribal participation is strongly encouraged during PHCs when Indian children are involved. If the ICWA status is unknown at the time of a PHC, the facilitator will ask what must happen to determine that status.

***For more information concerning ICWA and MICWA, please visit the Montana Court Improvement Program (CIP) website at [cip.mt.gov](http://cip.mt.gov), where you will find a link to eLearning guides, including an eLearning guide about ICWA.***

### **Children's Update**

PHC facilitators must help assess how the children are doing and what they might need. Things have likely changed for the children since their removals, and it is essential to evaluate their current condition. Parties and participants will discuss the children's strengths so those strengths can serve as a foundation for their growth. In addition to understanding how the children are doing overall, at home, and during family time and visits, the parties and participants will also need to know how school-aged children are doing in school.

It is also important to determine whether children need any assessments or have any special needs. Assessments might be as routine as dental or medical check-ups or more complex, such as developmental delays. Special needs can be based on professional diagnoses.

However, they might also depend on a child's specific needs, like staying in contact with a close friend or relative, or participating in activities such as dance, choir, theater, or sports.

PHC facilitators also ask about paternity. They want to know if paternity has been established and, if so, how it was confirmed. If paternity has not been established, they need information about any potential fathers and the steps being taken to determine paternity. At a minimum, children should have the chance to know who their father is. Occasionally, unknown fathers may even serve as the best placement options for children.

### **Parents' Status**

PHC facilitators ask questions about the services and tasks needed to create a safe and healthy environment for children to return home. Similar to the children's update, facilitators inquire about parents' strengths, which can be a foundation to build on. Things have likely changed for parents since the petition and affidavit were filed. These details should be explored.

Child Protection Investigators, Child Reunification Specialists, and parents may have already discussed available services and treatment options. Parents may have already engaged in some of these services, like providing chemical dependency evaluations and testing. PHC facilitators ask whether the parents believe they might need additional services. Child Protection Investigators and Child Reunification Specialists should be prepared to provide initial information about the services they believe the parents need, so their children can safely return home. Parties and participants discuss which services need to start as soon as possible and the steps required to begin those services. PHC facilitators try to identify any barriers that could prevent parents from completing their services and treatment. Barriers can derail even good plans if they are not addressed early.

PHC facilitators ask whether there are any related cases. These cases might be pending or already resolved. Criminal matters, domestic relations cases, orders of protection, and previous or sibling DN cases can significantly influence a pending DN case.

Parents may have extended family and support persons who can assist them. If support people are available, it's important to clarify how the parents want them to be involved. These individuals could be options for placement or assist with family visits, outings, and transportation. Ideally, these people will stay involved and continue supporting the family after the children are safely home and the DN case has been dismissed. The goal is for families to get the support they need to keep the home safe and prevent future DN cases.

### **Placement of the Children**

During PHCs, parties and participants discuss the best placement options for children. This process begins by reviewing the children's current placement and determining whether it is the most suitable living situation. If the parents haven't met the foster parents, known as resource parents, there may be discussions about arranging a meeting. Sometimes, parents



worry about their children's safety while living with strangers. They might be concerned about the resource parents' long-term intentions and whether they plan to keep the children. Meeting with the resource parents can help ease the parents' concerns and allow them to focus on the services and treatment needed for the children to return home safely.

In some cases, there is a non-custodial parent with no allegations of parental unfitness against them. These parents are called non-offending parents. When a non-offending parent is involved, discussions will take place about whether that parent wants to be the placement option for their children. If the parent chooses to be a placement option, further discussions will determine whether the non-offending parent is a safe choice for the children.

The parties and participants will discuss potential placement options when children are not with relatives or kin. If relatives or kin are present during PHCs, questions may be asked to determine whether they are interested in becoming a placement option and whether they can safely care for the children.

There might be discussions about whether children can return home soon, with or without an in-home safety plan. This may not occur during every PHC, but if a return is possible, these talks can lead to an early in-home plan. Since emergency protective services (EPS) hearings mainly focus on deciding whether children can return home immediately, conversations about an early return are likely to happen during PHCs.

### **Family Time and Visitation**

PHC facilitators focus on exploring family time and visitation options to see whether they can be improved and increased.

Initial questions about this topic focus on whether the parents have had a chance to see their children since their removal. If the parents have not seen their children, discussions should be held about scheduling family time. There may be valid reasons why family time and visitation have not started yet, such as a parent's failure to communicate with the Child Protection Investigator or Child Reunification Specialist, or the very short time between removal and the PHC. Family time might also be unsafe with one or both parents. Regardless, PHCs provide a great opportunity to initiate discussions about family time, especially when visitations have not yet begun.

If parents have already visited with their children, there may be questions about the current family time plan. PHC facilitators focus on whether family time can be safely increased or improved. It is essential to consider whether unsupervised visitation is possible and, if not, why supervision is necessary. Additionally, discussion about visitation in the community may occur, along with the possibility of family contact through texts, phone calls, video chats, and during family, school, religious, or club activities. Family time should go beyond just in-person visits; visitation is only one part of family time.

Relatives and kin might be discussed again, focusing on how they can support family time through supervision in a family-like setting. They could help remove or lower barriers to family interactions by providing essentials such as transportation and supervision.

Planning for extended family and kinship contact with the children should also be addressed. Children often have close bonds with relatives beyond their immediate family and with close friends who play a vital role in their well-being. These relationships must be maintained during foster care because they serve the children's best interests.

### **What Must Happen for Children to Return Home – “Conditions of Return”**

In addition to discussions about the placement of children, family time and visitations, and services and treatment for the family, conversations should also occur about whether the children can safely return home. If the children can return home quickly, the focus will be on helping them transition back home. If not, the emphasis will be on what needs to happen before they can safely return home.

Since the primary purpose of EPS hearings following PHCs is for the court to determine whether the children's removal will extend beyond those hearings, PHCs sometimes begin with questions about whether the children can return home immediately or whether certain conditions can be established for their quick return. In some PHCs, these discussions may start right after the introductions.

If the children cannot return home soon, the necessary conditions for their safe return will be discussed in detail. These discussions should be consistent with previous conversations about the children's placement, family time and visitation, as well as services and treatment for the family. These conditions of return may serve as a summary of the PHC.

PHC facilitators typically ask what must happen for children to be able to return home. Sometimes, lawyers or others use the term “conditions of return.” However, PHC facilitators try to avoid that phrase because it can confuse parents and other participants and make Child Protection Investigators and Child Reunification Specialists feel as if they are being put on the spot early in a DN case. Instead, PHC facilitators promote open discussions about what must occur for the children to return home safely, aiming to prevent confusion or pressure caused by unclear language.

### **Preparing for Court**

The EPS hearing will happen within five business days of the children's removal and shortly after a PHC. Facilitators ask whether the show cause hearing can be scheduled within 21 days of the filing of a DN case. Show cause hearings may be delayed if a party or parties cannot be served. If the parties are present and willing to discuss the matter, there will be discussions about whether any party intends to contest these early hearings.

If the parties do not plan to contest the EPS and show cause hearings, discussions may be held to determine whether the adjudication and dispositional hearings are still necessary. It

is possible that, at this point, the parties may agree that serious safety concerns must be addressed before the children can safely return home. If so, they could potentially avoid an adjudication and dispositional hearing through stipulations. The earlier adjudication occurs, the sooner treatment plans can be developed. These treatment plans can be based largely on the discussions that took place during the PHC. Starting treatment plans early gives parents more time to complete them.

Additionally, conversations may take place regarding the scheduling of family engagement meetings. These facilitated meetings provide opportunities to continue discussions that began during the PHC. Ideally, the discussions started during PHCs will continue, both formally and informally, throughout a DN case, evolving as progress is made, and setbacks may occur.

### **Sharing Information**

The judge does not participate in the PHC, but attorneys sometimes provide brief updates about PHC discussions during the first court hearing. The judge may ask the attorneys and parties about a PHC. The PHC facilitator is not present during court hearings. A party can request that all or part of the PHC discussions not be shared with the judge. However, information from the PHC could provide the court with a better understanding of the case, leading to more productive hearings.

***For more information about PHCs, please visit the Montana Court Improvement Program (CIP) website at [cip.mt.gov](http://cip.mt.gov), where you can find a link to eLearning guides, including one specifically designed for stakeholders on PHCs.***

## PRE-HEARING CONFERENCE FACILITATOR NOTES

Facilitators often take notes during a PHC. The materials provided in the next five pages include a blank version of the PHC facilitator notes they use to stay on track during an actual PHC. We share these notes to provide you with an understanding of what facilitators rely on to guide the PHC process. Facilitators may also summarize their notes for stakeholders at the end of the PHC.

The form helps the facilitator keep track of which areas have been covered and which still need attention. The order of topics may vary depending on the facilitator's experience and preference. Sometimes, discussions skip ahead or backtrack when new information arises during a PHC.

These facilitator notes are simply a guide to help organize PHCs. They begin with bullet points to remind even experienced PHC facilitators of key introductory topics.

**We have found that welcoming parents and thanking them for their presence and participation improves their engagement.**

The final page is an attendance sheet distributed at the beginning of the PHC. Everyone should print their name, sign the sheet, and specify their role. If the PHC is conducted remotely, the facilitator completes the attendance sheet. This acts as a record of attendance and does not imply that participants agree with any or all of the discussions that took place that day.

The facilitator notes have been updated to include input from experienced facilitators and stakeholders. There have been changes, additions, and some topics have been rearranged. There is now a particular emphasis on safety concerns and conditions for return. The strengths of children and families are now formally addressed. Barriers to completing services are discussed to make sure the plan is workable. Services have been relocated to a section focused on the parents for a more holistic approach. There are now discussions about the parents' support network and contact between the children and extended family. We believe this revised version has improved the flow and content of PHCs.

## PHC FACILITATOR NOTES

Child/ren Name/s: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Case Number: DN- \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

### Introductions

- Introduce yourself
- Welcome and thank parent/s for participating
- Explain the PHC purpose and process
- Ask everyone to introduce themselves and provide the attendance sheet

### Initial Questions

- Who is the Child Protection Investigator? \_\_\_\_\_
- Who is/will be the Child Reunification Specialist? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are all parents and parties present? Y N  
If not, who is missing and do we know why? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does ICWA apply? Y N  
If yes, what Tribe(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

### Child's or Children's Status

- Has paternity been established? Y N  
How was it established or what must be done to establish it? \_\_\_\_\_
- General status of the child or children  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Strengths of the child or children  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- School - How is/are the child or children doing in school?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Is early intervention or screening needed? Y N  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- Are there special needs? Y N  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Are there medical or dental needs? Y N  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### **Parent or Parents' Status**

- Are there any related cases? Y N  
If yes, what type and case number? \_\_\_\_\_
- Hearings currently scheduled in those cases? \_\_\_\_\_
- Strengths of the parent/s  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Who are the parent/s' support persons and/or extended family they would like included in this process?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What services or tasks do parents believe would help them to parent safely? ***Ask parents first!***  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What services or tasks does the CFSD worker believe would help parents to parent safely?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What are the priorities for services or tasks?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- How can we get those services started ASAP? What are the next steps for CFSD and parents?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What are the parent/s' potential barriers to completing treatment plan tasks?
  - Transportation \_\_\_\_\_
  - Housing \_\_\_\_\_
  - Phone \_\_\_\_\_
  - Income \_\_\_\_\_

### **Placement**

- With whom is/are the child or children placed, and why?

---

- Agreements and disagreements concerning placement, and why?

---

- Are there kinship/ICWA options not yet considered?

---

### **Family Time**

- Has/Have the parent/s seen their child or children? If so, where and how often?

---

- Are there options to safely increase family time and what is CFSD's plan moving forward?  
(Relatives, friends, churches, parks, etc.)

---

- If family time is currently supervised, what are the barriers to less restrictive family time?

---

- What is the plan for extended family contact?

---

- Agreements and disagreements concerning family time?

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### **Conditions for Return**

- Can the child or children safely return home? Y N

- If not (**ask CFSD worker**), what conditions need to be met for the child or children to return home?

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**Preparing for Court**

- Are we able to proceed with the EPS or Show Cause hearing? Y N
- Is anyone contesting the EPS or Show Cause hearing? Y N
- What are the plans for the EPS or Show Cause hearing?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- FEMs currently scheduled? \_\_\_\_\_

**Additional Notes**

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## ATTENDANCE SHEET – PRE-HEARING CONFERENCE

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Child/ren Name/s \_\_\_\_\_ DN \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name

Signature

Role

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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## **TIPS FOR PHC STAKEHOLDERS**

**The following section highlights insights gained from designing and conducting PHCs in various Montana jurisdictions over the past few years. These points are provided as tips for stakeholders involved with PHCs. Some of these items were anticipated when PHCs began, while others were surprises. We hope these ideas are helpful for you.**

### **General**

1. A PHC is not a typical mediation process. In a PHC, except for extreme cases, all parties share the same goal from the start. The goal is to reunify the family. In a typical non-PHC mediation, the parties often have different goals. Their purposes are usually in direct opposition. It's helpful during a PHC to remember that everyone generally wants the same outcome of reunification. While ideas about the timeline and methods to achieve this goal may differ, at least everyone is working toward reunification. Understanding each other's different positions can help you develop a collaborative plan to reach the goal of reunification.
2. Our data shows that all types of permanency (reunifications, placements with non-offending parents, termination of parental rights, guardianships, etc.) are being achieved more quickly in cases with PHCs. PHC cases tend to be shorter, which helps reduce DN caseloads. Data also indicates that when parents actively participate in PHCs, they are more likely to have their children returned home. Families are more likely to reunify when we make an effort to engage parents in PHCs.
3. Come prepared for the PHC discussions, if possible. Talk with the people you work with or represent before the PHC. If you are a Child Protection Investigator, Child Reunification Specialist, or attorney representing the state, be ready to clearly present the safety concerns in an organized manner. Also, be prepared to discuss what services you believe are necessary to address those concerns and potentially provide a safe home for the children. As an attorney representing a parent, try to be ready to discuss any services your client has participated in or is willing to engage in early in the case. Additionally, try to talk with your client about placement options for the children, as well as their family time and visitation preferences. Often, family time and visitation are genuine concerns for parents early in a case. Special advocates, like CASAs or GALs, can often gain valuable insights into the family by attending a PHC. Sometimes, items discussed at the PHC are not apparent from the petition and affidavit alone.

### **Party Hostilities**

4. Parents may be hostile toward the entire process, including the Child Protection Investigator and Child Reunification Specialist from CFSD. Nothing derails a PHC faster than parents who only want to talk about how angry they are. A parent's frustration and anger can cause the Child Protection Investigator and Child Reunification Specialist to become defensive about their decisions and actions. While these emotions may be natural and genuine, they are usually not helpful in achieving the PHC goal of designing a plan to reunify the family in a safe home. Preparing clients ahead of time for a PHC by discussing the importance of reunification planning can foster a more productive PHC.
5. When parties get off course during a PHC, it is important to listen to what they have to say. However, at some point, they need to be politely guided back to the structured discussion. While the PHC facilitator is responsible for keeping the conversation on track, stakeholders can help by reminding the people they represent about the limited time available and the importance of the discussion.
6. It is crucial for you to attend and arrive on time for PHCs. There is a limited window to conduct a PHC. When people arrive late, they may miss important parts of the discussions. If an attorney is not present, PHC facilitators are trained to avoid any discussions that could potentially harm their client. Attorneys and other parties are not allowed to ask questions to the absent attorney's client. The client of the missing attorney effectively becomes a passive participant in the PHC planning process. When parents do not attend a PHC, they miss the opportunity to participate in open discussions aimed at achieving family reunification.

### **Stipulations**

7. Parents sometimes agree to stipulate to emergency protective services during the PHC. This stipulation, which effectively eliminates the need for a contested show cause hearing, can provide an opportunity to discuss whether they plan to stipulate to adjudication and disposition. It may be obvious to everyone that the court will grant jurisdiction and temporary legal custody due to apparent safety concerns. Is an additional court date needed? Is it necessary to wait another month or more for jurisdiction and temporary legal custody? If there is an early stipulation to jurisdiction, treatment plans can be presented to the court sooner, since jurisdiction is usually needed to order a treatment plan. Thus, the process of formally seeking reunification through treatment plans can begin earlier.

### **Locating Missing Parents**

8. If a parent is not present, they may not have been served, and the state might not know how to find them. Someone at the PHC usually has some information about how to locate the absent parent. They could have details about relatives, social media, or places where the missing parent lived or worked. While publication can be used to serve missing parents, the process rarely allows them to participate actively. If they don't know about the case, they cannot be involved.
9. Montana law permits the court to place children with a non-custodial/non-offending parent during disposition. Thus, it is essential to emphasize the need to locate missing parents so they can be considered as placement options.

### **Topics of Focus – a Theme**

10. There is usually a “theme” for each PHC. Sometimes, there is a specific issue the parties need to discuss that is more important than the other topics. For instance, there may be a good reason why the parents want to contest the case. You might have an ICWA case, and it is very important to one or both of the parents that the Tribe gets involved and that the children are placed with a relative. If there is something you believe should be discussed or highlighted during a PHC, make sure the facilitator knows. PHCs do not have to follow a strict script. If there are topics that need extra attention, those should be covered in more detail.
11. Sometimes, the parties will do an excellent job of focusing on the critical issues without guidance from the facilitator. During these productive discussions, do not be surprised if the facilitator lets the conversation flow naturally, only speaking up occasionally. This kind of productive conversation can help build trust between parties. We hope these discussions will continue throughout the case without the ongoing need for a facilitator to be present.

### **Available Services**

12. Based on your professional experience, you have or will gather knowledge about services available in your community. It is okay to share that information. For example, you might say, “Last week I heard about a program that addresses this specific issue and its name is \_\_\_\_.” Would it make sense for the Child Protection Investigator or Child Reunification Specialist to set up a referral with that organization?

### **ICWA**

13. It is crucial to discuss ICWA early in the case. Early conversations about ICWA can prevent delays and legal problems later on. More importantly, these discussions help safeguard the rights of Native Americans and Tribes. If there are any questions about tribal membership or eligibility, make sure that active efforts are being made to resolve them. Only the Tribe can determine whether children are members or eligible for membership. Be sure to discuss what steps have been taken to contact the Tribe or Tribes. The sooner the Tribe is informed about the case, the better. Recent Montana Supreme Court rulings have emphasized the importance of resolving ICWA issues.
14. Sometimes, Native American children are placed in non-relative and non-Native-American homes for extended periods. You should explore culturally appropriate placements at PHCs before the children become strongly attached to a foster or resource family. A serious issue can arise when parental rights are terminated after a year or more, leading to discussions about moving children from a home where they are deeply connected to a home with relatives or tribal members. This process can be very hard on the children. It can be prevented by placing children early with suitable relatives or other culturally appropriate placements. Having these conversations at the PHC is essential.

### **Paternity**

15. If paternity hasn't been legally established, it should be discussed during a PHC. Otherwise, it could lead to complex legal issues later in the case. At the very least, children should have the opportunity to know who their father is. An unknown father might even provide the children with a safe, stable, and happy home. If any paperwork needs to be taken care of, make sure someone is responsible for completing it. If there are questions about paternity, the names and contact information of all potential fathers should be discussed during the PHC. This information could help identify the actual father.

### **Related Cases**

16. Any related cases should be discussed at the PHC. Some PHC participants are not always aware of related cases or may not understand their importance. These cases can have a significant impact on the PHC and DN case. Criminal matters or domestic relations orders often change the dynamics of a PHC. Cases involving siblings can be important

because the parents may already have had a DN case with pending or previous treatment plans. How the parents handled those treatment plans may greatly influence the planning for a new case.

### **Family Engagement Meetings**

17. If a Family Engagement Meeting (“FEM”) has not been scheduled, you can encourage the Child Protection Investigator or Child Reunification Specialist to set one up within the next few weeks. FEMs provide an opportunity for the parties to continue discussions started during PHCs. They cover similar topics to PHCs and can be held at any point during the DN case.

### **Children’s Needs**

18. Parents should discuss their children's needs. Their perspective can sometimes be overlooked when deciding what services are needed. Even if they are dealing with their own issues, parents are still the most likely source of information about their kids. They can often help identify concerns that other PHC parties and participants might miss. Addressing the children’s issues early is vital for successful family reunification.
19. School can be a major challenge for children entering foster care. These children might already face difficulties in school and/or have switched schools multiple times throughout their lives. For school-aged children with difficulties in school, one of the most important PHC topics is discussing available services and efforts to stabilize their school placements.
20. Children’s special needs can extend beyond a diagnosis. While participants discuss any specific needs the children might have, the focus should not be limited to conditions that a professional can diagnose. Also, look for items that are meaningful to a particular child. For example, a child may have a game, toy, or piece of clothing that holds special significance for them. You can talk about how that item might be delivered to them. A child may have friends or relatives who are very close to them. You could discuss strategies for maintaining those relationships during foster care. A child may participate in an activity they are passionate about. You could talk about how that activity can continue during foster care. These kinds of things can help provide a sense of normalcy for children while they are in foster care.

## **Placement**

21. During the discussion about the placement of the children, it is important to determine whether the parents can meet the foster care providers. If the parents meet the foster or resource parents and believe their children are safe, they can focus on the changes needed for their children to return home safely. Parents who work well with foster or resource parents are more likely to understand what their children are experiencing in foster care. Ideally, the children will observe this positive relationship between their parents and foster care providers and benefit from that relationship.
22. Find out about any relatives or close family friends who have a strong bond with the children. These people can be options for placement and/or family time and visitation. During a removal, parents might be very emotional or otherwise unable to focus, which can make conversations difficult. They may not understand the importance of relatives and kin in the process. Make sure the parents realize how crucial it can be to consider relative or kinship placements. This discussion is often a key part of PHCs.
23. During placement discussions, parents may ask about their children returning home. A conversation about placement with a parent or parents could be the main focus of the PHC. When the topic of a return home is mentioned, participants can share their thoughts and expectations to ensure it can happen safely. If everyone agrees, they can talk about how to make the return possible. If there are any tasks to complete before the children go home, this discussion can naturally lead to productive talks about services for the parents and the conditions needed for the return.
24. It can sometimes make sense to discuss an in-home safety plan during a PHC. CFSD has refocused on its safety model (SAMS). The parties might agree that safety measures could be put in place that would allow the children to return home. For example, a relative might be able to move into the home as a safety service provider, or parents might move into a relative's home. Safety planning is a valuable topic to explore during a PHC.

### **Family Time/Visitation**

25. It is essential to explore options for increasing family time and minimizing supervision. A well-structured visitation plan is a crucial part of the case plan. It can help maintain the children's identity and reduce the trauma of removal. Look beyond the usual "one-hour supervised visit." Think about genuine family interactions, not just "visitation." Does visitation genuinely need to be supervised? If so, why? Are there relatives or friends who could supervise? Can family time take place in a community setting that feels more like a family environment? Are there therapeutic or other methods to extend family time? Asking questions about expanding family interactions and considering unsupervised visits during group discussions can be highly productive.

### **Services**

26. Service plans should be customized for each individual. Every parent, and possibly each child, may have different service needs. What have they already started? What does the state expect them to do, and what are the priorities? What do the parents believe they need? Services can begin well before the court issues treatment plans.
27. Discussions should focus on the strengths and weaknesses of both children and parents. How do these qualities influence family dynamics and each member's ability to function? Strengths might provide opportunities that would not otherwise exist. Weaknesses could play a key role in determining the services needed. This personalized approach during PHCs can help the parties develop treatment plans tailored to the family's specific needs.
28. Discuss any barriers to completing services. A perfect plan doesn't work if the parents do not have enough time or the ability to follow through with the requested services. Obstacles can be as simple as lacking access to transportation, mail, or a phone. They can also be significant, like trying to fit services into a busy work and family schedule. By addressing these potential barriers early, parents have a better chance of resolving the issues that brought the case before the court.

### **Conditions of Return**

29. For planning and transparency, discuss what needs to be completed for the children to go home while the parents are present and participating. Avoid using the term "conditions of return." Instead, focus on what must be done. A PHC is an excellent opportunity to encourage the parties to talk about this. PHCs can also allow other



participants to help plan these steps. These items should be addressed so parents can clearly understand what they need to do and plan accordingly for their children to return home.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

At its core, a PHC is simply a discussion about placement, family time, services, and conditions of return. It should not resemble a court hearing. PHCs take place before the first court appearance. However, to truly be effective, these types of conversations should continue throughout the case. PHCs are just a starting point. Family engagement meetings and informal discussions should be used to carry on these conversations.

PHCs are improving the outcomes and reducing timelines for DN cases. Our data shows that when parents actively engage in PHCs, the likelihood of children returning home increases. Moreover, the time to achieve permanency is considerably shorter. These faster milestones include reunifications, termination of parental rights, and the establishment of guardianships.

PHCs do not have to follow a script. For maximum effectiveness, parties must actively participate in the process. If you or the party you represent believe something should be addressed during a PHC, be sure to bring that subject to the facilitator's attention. By preparing for your PHC with your coworkers and those you represent, you, as a stakeholder, can help ensure your points are considered. This also increases the likelihood that an appropriate outcome will be reached in a timely manner.

Some PHCs are more productive than others. However, it is a rare PHC when something cannot be gained from the process. Most PHCs provide an opportunity to discuss critical issues, which leads to the development of a plan aimed at helping children return home. Ideally, PHCs provide an opportunity to support families in reunifying in a safe and healthy home.