

# Utah Interdisciplinary Parental Representation Program



Utah Indigent  
Defense Commission  
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# Interdisciplinary Parental Defense Serves Justice

The mission of the Indigent Defense Commission is to protect constitutionally guaranteed liberties through ongoing support for effective indigent defense services throughout the state of Utah

IPR teams support this mission

- Parents have a fundamental right to parent their children
- Parents have a constitutionally protected right to effective legal counsel
  - Children have a right to their parents
- Protecting and strengthening “family life” is a fundamental public policy of this state
- Effective legal representation requires a broad range of resources and skills

# Legal Services and Advocacy in Juvenile Court

## Why an Interdisciplinary Approach to Family Defense is Necessary

- Child welfare is a nexus of social work and legal practice and requires multidisciplinary resources
  - IPR teams combine legal knowledge with social work expertise to address both areas of need
  - Defense side social workers increase engagement and trust with parents through frequent contact and collaboration
  - Expertise of the IPR team helps identify needs and services that are relevant and necessary to a strong defense
- The adversarial aspect of child welfare cases makes it crucial that parents have resources beyond just their appointed attorney
- Fundamental rights of families are always infringed in these cases and strong legal advocacy supported by adequate resources is crucial to protect those rights
  - Support for legal representation is not a balanced system and parents need more resources

# History of the Utah IPR Pilot Program

- Initiated in 2022 by Senator Harper's bill - with an appropriation of \$170,000
- Grants were awarded to Weber and to the regional system in Iron/Beaver/Kane
  - Iron/Beaver/Kane (Angelica Judd) started November 2022
  - Weber (Corey Doolan) started December 2022
- IDC annual grant process in 2023 resulted in two more social worker hires
  - Davis County (Elaine Totten Beale)
  - Cache/Box Elder (Jessie Vicars)
- This pilot built on the interdisciplinary work that was being done in Utah County
  - Two social workers started in 2019 working for UTCPD
    - Pulled into the pilot in 2023
- We are collecting the same information from all the locations

# Attorney and Social Worker: Complementary Roles

- Attorneys
  - Navigate law, procedures, and legal advocacy
  - Represent parents in hearings and mediation
- Social Workers
  - Assess client needs, provide referrals
  - Support case planning and develop safety plans with the client
  - Help interpret trauma, provide cultural context and identify client's needs to the attorney
  - Build trust with clients to increase parent's engagement
  - Support and advocate for the client in CFT meetings
  - Prepare the client for court in collaboration with the attorney

## Activity Tracking Shows Social Workers Consistently:

- Make frequent contact with clients to provide support, keep up to date on the client's status and to help them resolve challenges they encounter
- Provide coaching and support to help client work more effectively with service providers and case workers
- Prepare clients for court hearings, attend hearings and ensure the client understands the process
- Prepare clients for and support clients when participating in family team meetings
- Connect clients directly with service providers to reduce barriers to accessing services
- Gather information from treatment professionals on client's needs and progress on complying with court orders
- Collect and provide the attorney with accurate, up to date information to support the defense case
- Provide emotional support for clients who face continual challenges as they work through the system

# IPR Teams and Protective Supervision Cases

- In home services are provided under court jurisdiction and pursuant to court orders
  - There is significant family disruption and an ongoing risk of family separation
    - Clients benefit from support by a social worker who is without conflicting duties
- IPR team provides frequent client contact, problem solving to address barriers and assistance to secure resources
  - Plus frequent advocacy on behalf of the client in multiple settings
- IPR teams assigned to represent the parent have a 90% success rate
  - Clients' cases were closed without a removal
    - Children not separated from their family

# IPR Teams and Out of Home Cases

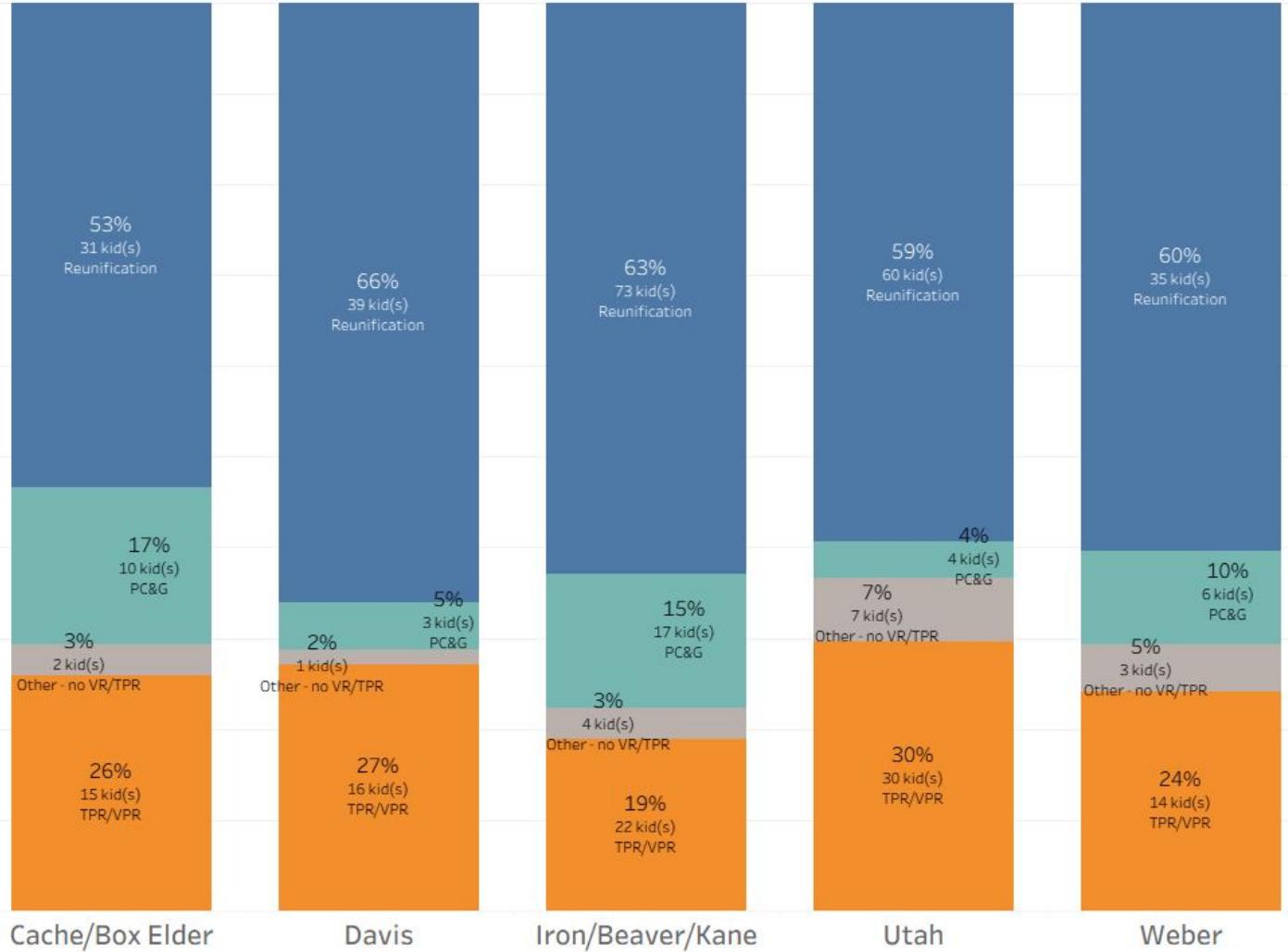
## Status of Placement at Permanency Hearing as an Outcome Measure

### The importance of the permanency hearing

- Parents face a deadline for convincing the court that custody should be returned
  - At 12 months after removal the court must hold a permanency hearing
- At that hearing—unless the time is extended for a brief period—the court must identify the permanent placement goal
- That decision drives the case going forward

## Current Data Regarding Placement and Permanency Goal

- Recorded the placement status at or outcome of the permanency hearing as reported by the IPR social worker
- Cases from January 2023 through September 2025 are included in our reporting
- We define the primary goal for the client to be obtaining the least restrictive permanent placement possible and to retain their parental rights
  - Reunification with the client is the top priority
  - Reunification with the other parent keeps the family together
  - Permanent placement with relatives allows the parent to retain some parental rights
- Reporting demonstrates that placement decisions at the permanency hearing show positive outcomes for parents to whom an IPR team was assigned



# IPR Delivers a Range of Positive Outcomes

- A statewide reunification rate above 60%
- High rates of Permanent Custody without TPR
- High rate of success in PSS cases
- Parents receive crucially important support outside of court
- Attorneys report they are increasing their connection with their clients and receiving the accurate and up to date information necessary to prepare for court proceedings
- IPR teams can improve collaboration between defense and the DCFS workers

Reunification = Return home to a parent

PC&G = Permanent Custody and Guardianship

Other = Other non-family living arrangement

TPR/VR = Termination of parental rights or voluntary relinquishment of rights

## Broad Support for IPR Within the System

- Attorneys regularly ask that a social worker be appointed to their case
- Judges ask for an interdisciplinary team in challenging or promising cases
- DCFS workers often welcome the support and coordination on their case
- Parents frequently state that they would not have made it to reunification without the social worker's support

# IPR Teams are Crucial to Balancing Legal Resources in this System

- Legal representation resources in this system are dramatically out of balance
  - AG's prosecuting these cases and GAL's have full time statewide offices
  - DCFS caseworker resources are available in every case the State files
- This imbalance works to the detriment of the parents and to their children
  - Less robust defense resources results in less capacity to provide a client with all that they need to successfully litigate their case
  - To better serve justice we need some equity
  - The IPR program is a small step to enhance the defense needs of families

# Questions

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