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Building a Multidisciplinary Advocacy Office from the Ground Up:

The Founding and Development of Foster Care Advocacy Center in Houston, Texas

The multidisciplinary law office approach to representing youth and families in dependency cases continues to prove an efficient and effective model for holistic, person-centered advocacy. Assessing and addressing clients' complex and intersecting needs can be coordinated and streamlined in this way, often leading to better outcomes. But what is like to build a practice like this from the ground up? NACC asked Tara Grigg Green, co-founder and executive director of the multidisciplinary Foster Care Advocacy Center in Houston, Texas, to share her experience, lessons learned, and plans for the future.

Can you tell us a little about when and why you founded the Foster Care Advocacy Center (FCAC)?

Although I am from Houston, I went to law school and policy school on the East Coast for four years. During that time, I had internships and externships with highly regarded multidisciplinary law offices for children and parents involved in dependency cases. I witnessed firsthand how cases have better outcomes when individuals are represented by a multidisciplinary team. When I started my Skadden Fellowship working on dependency cases in Houston, I was shocked to see that this type of representation did not exist in one of the biggest cities in the country. While working with my youth clients, I would find myself trying to explain contraceptive options to them or trying to help a kinship caregiver apply for Medicaid — things I definitely did not learn in law school. I was convinced I could better serve my clients if I were able to work with a social worker. Eventually, my FCAC co-founder took me to coffee and told me, "If we don't do it, no one will." I knew he was right, so we spent the next year preparing for our launch by meeting with other legal nonprofit leaders in Houston and people



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tara Grigg Green is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Foster Care Advocacy Center, a nonprofit multidisciplinary law office in Houston, Texas that represents children and parents involved in child welfare cases. Prior to starting FCAC, Tara was a Skadden Fellow at Disability Rights Texas and clerked for Hon. Micaela Alvarez of the U.S. Southern District of Texas in McAllen. Tara holds a J.D. from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, a M.P.P. from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and a B.A. from Rice University.

For more information about FCAC, please visit www.fcactexas.org or email info@fcactexas.org.





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who run multidisciplinary offices around the country, applying for startup funding, and finalizing the documents we needed to be operational. FCAC started operating in June 2018 with me as the only employee and a handful of clients. Today, we have a staff of 8, currently represent approximately 200 clients, and have closed about 100 cases.

What is FCAC's mission and vision? What client population do you serve?

FCAC's mission is to provide holistic advocacy inside and outside the courtroom for children and parents involved in the child welfare system. Our vision is to create a more just foster system.

Because Harris County does not have offices that represent parents or children in dependency cases, representation is done by a bar of solo practitioners. We receive appointments from almost all the fifteen Harris County courts presiding over dependency cases. About two-thirds of our clients are children and about one-third are parents. Since we have a social services team and our attorneys do ancillary litigation like special education proceedings and Medicaid appeals, we are often assigned some of the most complex cases involving individuals with intellectual disabilities, serious mental illnesses, chronic health issues, or older youth with long-term system involvement. We have also represented about 25 community legal advocacy clients to see how other legal work can help prevent unnecessary removal of children.

Can you describe how your model of multidisciplinary representation works in a typical case?

How does multi-disciplinary representation benefit the clients you work with?

FCAC has a social services team: a Social Services Director (LMSW), Parent Partner (lived experience with the child welfare system, substance abuse, and sexual exploitation), and social work interns doing their field work at FCAC. We, unfortunately, do not have enough social services staff to have social service support on every case. Every new case is staffed by the Social Services Director and the lead attorney to assign an intervention level of 0–4 to the case. This determines whether the social services team is working the case intensively (meeting the client every week and doing regular crisis management), providing a moderate level of assistance (meeting the client once a month and making service referrals), or just meeting the client once for a basic assessment. The levels can change at any time and are regularly reviewed by the Social Services Director. The social services team member and the lead attorney are in constant communication, including regular staffings about the client's needs and the legal case, and the attorney is still expected to visit with the client and attend all meetings with CPS.

The social services team has been invaluable in locating and assessing appropriate placements, including conducting our own risk assessments on family members. Additionally, the social services team identifies treatment providers, helps secure housing vouchers, and diffuses crisis situations with



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clients. Most importantly, the social services team works with clients to achieve client-directed goals, not just goals and requirements CPS determines.

We have found that the parent clients who work with our Parent Partner have higher engagement in services, are more likely to have unsupervised visitation with children, are more likely to refrain from substance use, and have more amicable case resolutions. We assign her to every other parent client appointment we receive in our best effort to randomize her “intervention.” Because of our Parent Partner’s own lived experiences, she has an intangible connection with our parent clients that help illuminate their strengths.

What are the biggest lessons you have learned since founding FCAC? What have been your biggest challenges?

My biggest lesson has been how important it is to have an amazing team, especially at this stage. It has been an incredible privilege to be able to handpick everyone who works for FCAC. My team is excellent at what they do, and I take so much pride in their work. All of us worked at more lucrative and stable jobs before joining FCAC, and taking a leap of faith together has bonded all of us. We trust each other and hold each other accountable. I am trying to savor this moment because I know that as we keep growing, my relationships with the frontline staff will be more diffuse, and this intimate family feeling will not be able to last forever. However, especially in this early stage, it has been a huge relief that I never have to worry about the quality of our work.

Our work is taking care of vulnerable people, so it has also been a very important lesson for me that you must take care of your people who take care of people. I try to stay cognizant of how the emotional toll of our work is compounded by the time we are living in. I open every one-on-one with “How are you doing?” and I end it with “What do you need from me?” This has helped me do my best to make sure my expectations of my staff are reasonable and feasible. I also have frequent check-ins because I want to make sure we course-correct before a small problem grows into a big one and as we continue to develop our policies and practices.

As far as challenges, it is always funding — finding it, keeping it, and getting more of it so we can grow. On cases where we are court-appointed to represent the child or the parent, we are able to bill the county for the attorney’s time, which covers about fifty percent of our costs. Since we are not reimbursed for any of the social services team’s work on a case, I fundraise to cover the costs of the multidisciplinary and support staff. We are very fortunate that we received the support of a few local foundations early on, which is how we were able to create our multidisciplinary team.

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What's on deck for FCAC in 2021? What are you most excited about?

I am very hopeful to do three things in 2021. The first is to hire an attorney to represent our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) clients who are boys and young men. Right now, our staff is all women, which is great in many ways, but we are not able to connect with our male clients with shared lived experiences. I am extremely proud that the racial diversity of our staff matches the racial diversity of our clients and the communities we serve, but gender diversity is an important piece that we are missing.

The second is I hope we continue to build our pre-petition legal work. We spent the last few years taking a large variety of pro-bono clients to explore where we can best meet the needs of the community. We have found that the time after CPS gets involved but before the child is removed is where we can make the most impact. I think this is the year where that work can start to thrive because of the groundwork we have laid with stakeholders and current clients.

Lastly, we just launched a partnership with the Harris County Youth Collective (HCYC) to bring in Peer Partners for our clients who are dual status and/or older youth at risk of aging out of care. HCYC has young adults on staff with lived experience going through the foster care system and the juvenile justice system. Since we have had enormous success with our parent clients who work with our Parent Partner, we are hoping to have similar success with our Peer Partners for youth clients, and we are currently piloting how this will work with a small number of youth. I am very hopeful we will be able to scale this up by the end of the year. ■