



A Comprehensive Focus Group Analysis on the Impact of Child Welfare System and Support at PSF Family Resource Centers

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Focus Group Methods

As part of a broader evaluation effort, the utilization of focus groups of patrons receiving services and supports at each of the project family resource centers (FRC) was proposed to help answer general questions related to fidelity of services and supports to the protective factor model, the reach of FRCs' efforts, and implementation drivers, solutions, and barriers. The FRCs include the Cone Park Library Resource Center (CPLRC), the Library Partnership Resource Center (LPRC), the SWAG Family Resource Center (SWAG FRC), and the NorthStar Family Resource Center (NSFRC). Please note, although initially identified as “*focus groups*” within the evaluation plan, the phrase “*patron feedback groups*” was substituted for these efforts following consultation with evaluation team members and advisory groups (that included patrons) that suggested the revised group reference would be more engaging and inviting for prospective members¹.

Detailed information related to the methodology guiding the sample selection of patrons to participate and other procedures and limitations associated with the evaluation design can be found in a separate brief (see Perry et.al, 2024). Further, a separate guide was produced that highlighted in detail the processes and protocols utilized in forming and facilitating the patron feedback groups and the structure for the content analysis, results of which are detailed in this report (see Institute for Child and Family Services Research, 2023). In sum, patron participants were randomly sampled to participate from a sampling frame of patrons that consented to participate in the formal evaluation. The selection was stratified across PSF Family Resource Centers with two groups per FRC. Efforts were made to secure between 6 and 10 participants per group with 75% of participants serving as caregivers of children (an additional stratum for

¹ Methodological and planning considerations were still guided by theory, principles and protocols associated with the term “focus groups” and other qualitative/narrative approaches for planning, implementation/data collection, and content analyses found with the normative/professional literature.

selection) given that one of the objectives (among others) of the evaluation is to assess the effect of FRCs in their capacity to prevent maltreatment and family involvement with child welfare systems. Although focus patron feedback groups are FRC specific (and analyses can be stratified by FRC), patrons at each were asked the same questions. Some commonalities of perspective across FRC focus groups were identified that permit an aggregation of findings (and identification of an aggregate content saturation level) in select analyses denoted in this and other reports.

Questions for Patron Feedback Groups

The generation and final selection of questions to be asked with each feedback group was multifaceted and involved a few iterations. First, draft questions were constructed in consultation and brainstorming with other project staff, project implementation team members, and select PSF and FRC administrators. Following refinements to these questions, feedback, edits, and question suggestions were solicited via survey methods from key stakeholders that have been a source of information and consultation for other process evaluation activities. These individuals included program managers at each FRC, as well as members of each FRC Strengthening Family Self-Assessment (SFSA) teams (which include patrons/community ambassadors, key program staff and volunteers, and collaborative partners from the community). Although the survey was made available in electronic format, it was also available in paper form. One group of respondents—members of the Cone Park Research Advisory Council—met in-person as a group to discuss each question and provide feedback on the content and structure of select questions. The responses from surveyed stakeholders were reviewed, tallied, and summarized. At least one question originally aligned with each protective factor was chosen for inclusion for feedback group procedures deemed to be of highest rated value to “...best understanding patrons’

experiences at, and the impact of, each family resource center” (Perry, Lancaster, & Pegram, 2024).

The final set of questions (and associated sub-questions) included the following:

1. How does [FRC name] assist individuals and families with immediate needs?
2. What resources and supports do they provide?
 - Have they been helpful?
3. Were the activities and programs welcoming and inclusive? Did they make families feel comfortable interacting with others and participating in activities?
4. When interacting with staff, are you listened to and supported?
 - Do you think program staff are willing to work collaboratively with you to support your child(ren)’s development?
5. When thinking about yourself or other caregivers in the community, did the services and events at the resource center help manage stress?
 - Did these services help you to better deal with the demands of parenting during stressful times?
6. What additional services do you need as a caregiver to better cope with everyday stressors? What additional services do you need to cope with the stressors in your community?
7. Do program activities support your children’s social and emotional development?
8. Do you think that [FRC name] resources have helped caregivers in the community from being involved with the child welfare system?
9. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences with [FRC name]?

Child Welfare System

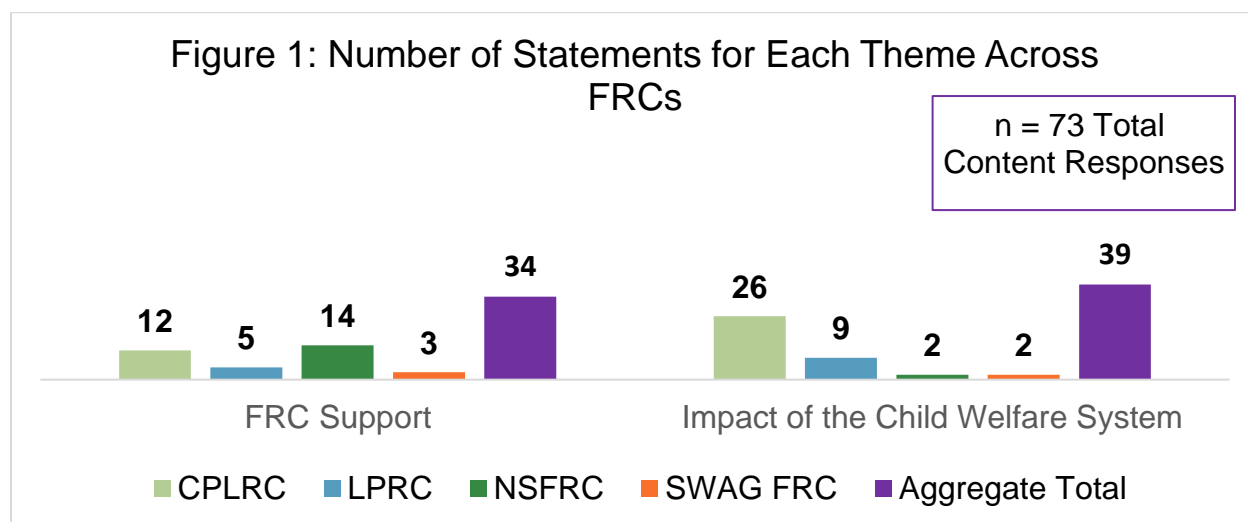
This report is an analysis of patron answers across all Family Resource Centers (FRCs) to the question: *Do you think that your FRCs resources have helped caregivers in the community from being involved with the child welfare system?* This question is central to Partnership for Strong Family's (PSF) Family Resource Center Model which is built upon a multi-system collaborative focusing on primary prevention that works toward strengthening families with the goal of preventing child maltreatment and safely reducing entries into foster care. Though there was some suggestion early on to change the name from child welfare system, the evaluation team opted instead to paraphrase the following statement for clarity and be available for questions.

When we speak of the child welfare system, we mean any involvement with the Florida Department of Children and Families given reported protection concerns (calls to the hotline and investigations) for a child; children entering foster care and other required involvement with a community-based care provider, like Partnership for Strong Families.

In addition to providing clarity, researchers hoped this statement would reduce any potential reactive effects. The moderators informed the patrons that no personal disclosure is required. In some instances, personal disclosures were provided and handled with care to protect patron privacy. The specifics of the patrons' situations are not known. It's important to note that the views and opinions expressed by patrons are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of Partnership for Strong Families. Given the sensitive and personal nature of the child welfare system topic, readers are advised that certain words or testimonials within this report may be triggering in some instances.

After the content analysis of recorded transcripts, two overall themes of "*FRC support*" and "*impact of the child welfare system*" were identified (see Figure 1). Each of the counts for themes represents the statements of those who attended one of the patron feedback groups. A captured statement may be as short as a word or affirmative agreement (in response to another person's statement) or as long as a paragraph with multiple quotes. Select statements by

individuals may contain content that reflects multiple themes. Each theme's content embodies subthemes listed and described at the beginning of each applicable themes section within this report. Figure 1 provides the sum of statements for each theme, stratified by FRC along with the aggregate total. The count of statements for each theme demonstrates a common level of importance across FRCs. It should be noted, however, that while some counts may be higher at one FRC compared to others, this could be a byproduct of the feedback group process and the variable participation from patrons across groups and centers.



In response to the question, there were 73 total content responses. While the content is categorized by appropriate themes and subthemes later in the paper, there was interest in identifying the number of patrons who spoke directly to the question and those who offered more detailed content. There were 15 brief statements (e.g., “yes”) of agreement/affirmation out of 73 and no disagreements that FRC services did or could help prevent child welfare involvement. Those agreements came from 9 patrons and one instance of multiple speakers (n = 2) at Cone Park Library Resource Center (CPLRC, n = 1), NorthStar Family Resource Center (NSFRC, n = 4), Library Partnership Resource Center (LPRC, (n = 1) and SWAG Family Resource Center (SWAG FRC, n = 3). Effort has been made to identify those agreement/affirmation statements within their respective themes.

All of the statements on this question were sorted into two themes. The first focused on beliefs regarding how FRCs can assist families with current or past involvement, labeled as "*FRC Support*," and on patron perceptions of the impact of the child welfare system, labeled as "*Impact of the Child Welfare System*." Moderators made several attempts during each feedback group to steer the discussion back to the initial question. However, patrons consistently chose to address the topic through these two lenses.

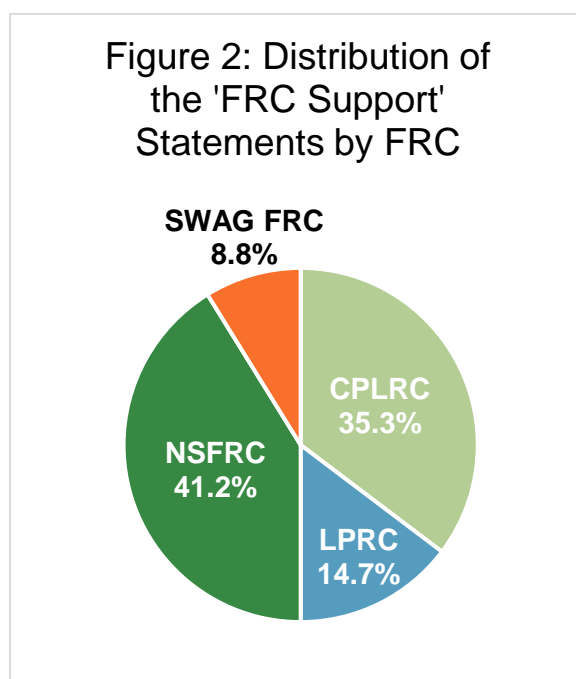
The theme "*FRC support*," is comprised of 34 statements and includes the various ways FRCs may assist patrons before, during or after a time of involvement with the formal child welfare system. The ways FRCs provide support in relation to involvement with the child welfare system are underscored through three subthemes: services provided, providing knowledgeable support, and extending emotional support.

The first theme entitled "*FRC support*" (n = 34 or 46.6%) was nearly equally represented with the second theme of "*Impact of the Child Welfare System*" (n = 39 or 53.4%). The following subthemes represent the impact patrons perceived from involvement with the child welfare system: emotional trauma, helplessness, being apprehensive, and limitations of the child welfare system and the FRCs. The first three subthemes delve into the emotions and experiences many patrons have had in dealing with or being aware of the child welfare system. The final subtheme, limitations, highlights the perceived constraints of the child welfare system and the FRCs to reduce involvement in the child welfare system.

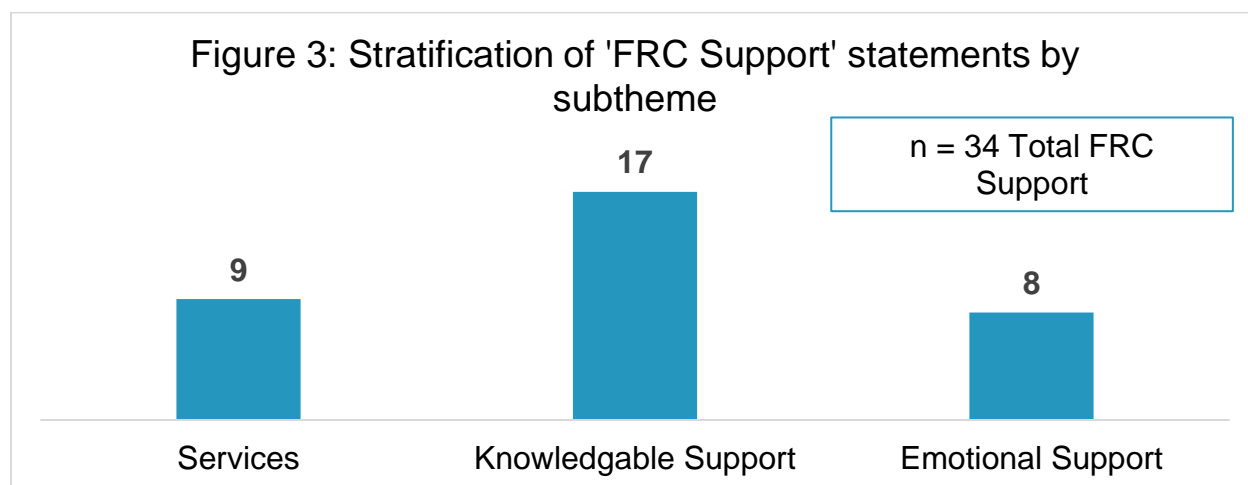
Theme One: FRC Support

This theme encompasses 34 statements which praise FRC resources or offer suggestions for additional ways FRCs might provide support to caregivers before, during, or after having an open child welfare case. Most (10 out of 14, or 71%) of the patrons who spoke to this theme, including one instance of multiple patrons speaking, affirmed that FRC resources could or have

helped caregivers in the community avoid involvement in the child welfare system. Every patron in this theme who directly answered the question "*Do you think that your FRC resources have helped caregivers in the community from being involved with the child welfare system?*" agreed, ranging from an emphatic yes to a "*they will do what they can.*" Though a variety of patrons spoke of FRC Support, this theme was discussed most at the CPLRC and NSFRC, with 35.3% and 41.2% of statements respectively (see Figure 2). This figure also displays statement counts across specific FRCs. Statements for this theme were provided by 14 patron participants at CPLRC (n = 5), NSFRC (n = 5), LPRC (n = 1), and SWAG FRC (n = 3).



Three subthemes emerged as potential avenues through which FRCs either currently do or could offer support. These include the provision of services, offering knowledgeable support, and being available to provide emotional support as needed.



Services

Partnership for Strong Families' FRC model is built upon a multi-system collaborative and offers a variety of free services that are responsive to the needs of the local community. The services provided at FRCs were listed in nine statements from five patrons at CPLRC (n = 1), NSFRC (n = 1) and SWAG FRC (n = 3). They highlight ways FRCs might help prevent involvement with the child welfare system or support families that may already have a case. At one point, multiple speakers assented that services provided at FRCs could prevent child welfare involvement. One mother who revealed that she previously had an open DCF case agreed, when speaking about how she accesses food, that FRCs help mitigate stressors and reduce or fill some of the family's needs lessening the possibility of connection with DCF. Providing an example of how FRCs services minimize involvement in the child welfare system, she shared:

The transportation because they complain about parents not complying with child support. If you have no transportation, how can you comply with child support? ... [FRC manager] give you bus passes. She give you transportation with a bus pass. Are you trying to get a job? She give you a bus [pass] for a job. If you get a job and she have a month bus pass she give you [a] month bus pass to get back and forth from work as long as you got that note saying that you do have a job like. So, it ... minimized a lot.

The following patrons agreed that by utilizing FRC services, it could prevent or mitigate the likelihood of involvement with the child welfare system. The additional issues they brought

up included wanting to expand services, take advantage of available resources, and concern for individuals who relocate from the community.

The parents are de-stressing, first of all, so they don't do any harmful thing to their child or to have DCF come in and with them de-stressing they're learning how to cope with their child. So, I think all we have to do is expand our program a little bit here and it would just help in general.

“I think it [FRC services] helps prevent that with some people. I'm not going to say all, but some people who take the advantage to come back here and use it.”

Yes, definitely ...And where I'm at now, Holly Heights, a lot of the children have moved. So I don't know how that's going to play out for SWAG, you know, with Holly Heights kids I know, they still have the Linton Oaks kids and Majestic Oaks. But a lot of those children who were coming here ... I know a lot of them moved out. But it would definitely benefit this center, the neighborhoods that surround SWAG, if everybody came together and implemented some more of our ideas to get involved with the community and strengthen our families and our communities and everything like that.

One patron simply stated, “*They will do what they can.*” This realistic statement conveys a sense of trust that FRCs will be there to provide support they are able to. Another patron was asked what FRCs could do to support a family with an open child welfare case and reiterated the trust and appreciation they have, “*Y'all, this library and everybody else doing more than enough for the people.*”

Knowledgeable Support

The largest number of statements (n = 17) for FRC support fell into the knowledgeable support subtheme, which explores how informed FRC staff might help prevent involvement with the child welfare system or support families that may already have a case. These statements came from nine patrons at CPLRC (n = 3), LPRC (n = 1), and NSFRC (n = 5). Some patrons felt that if caregivers had access to knowledgeable supports, such as how to access resources, involvement with the child welfare system might be avoided. There were six patrons who were clear in their stance that having access to a knowledgeable support system could prevent involvement with the child welfare system. Two of which agreed simply with “*yes*” and “*definitely*”. Moreover, two others shared additional nuance,

It could prevent it. But once, if they are targeted and get involved in it [DCF] then we need to be there to help support them, to get them out of it. Or to get them, you know, through whatever the situation is because some of them are gonna end up there regardless, you know.

Definitely think [so], because if you have a good support system, yeah, and you have people that you know you can go to, to ask questions, instead of just sitting at home trying to take it on yourself. Like then one thing leads to another and you're down that wrong path, and then there's no turning back.

Similar to the earlier comment which mentioned parents de-stressing to learn to cope with their child, one mother elaborated, expressing her belief that having knowledgeable support from day one of a newborn's life may prevent abuse and ultimately reduce entry into the child welfare system. She offered this as something the FRCs could do in the community¹, and was supported by murmurs of agreement from other patrons throughout:

What happens and we probably won't understand is once that baby starts crying all the time, that resentment starts to build between the parent, that relationship starts to get [difficult] and don't let the other stress be there too. You know. But then there's always those deep-seated, you know. And then I think in a lot of these, a lot of the communities are here, I'm staying here because, you know, we don't know the terms of postpartum depression and stuff. Those things are not talked about in the homes. You know that there's depression going on after a young mother has had maybe her third child and everything seemed normal the first two. So it's the day one thing, day one. Because if you're not hitting em day one by day 365, let's do a little extra math you know, by the time you get to like 24 months, abuse may have already started.

We observe that the assistance provided is not merely a service or emotional support; rather, it is delivered by an informed FRC staff member who possesses a knowledge base and/or skill set capable of providing relevant direction and assistance to families. The significance of this knowledgeable support was highlighted by one participant describing a hypothetical scenario where staff (not a party to nor inserting themselves into legal matters) could help parents objectively view and explore options, plans, and referrals for working/dealing with DCF (for

¹ FRC staff frequently refer mothers with infants to Healthy Start. For more information, visit Healthy Start on the Florida Department of Health website.

example, to ensure there is reunification with a child). These efforts, it was thought, may assist parents and families, and help minimize the feelings that "...they have no one on their team."

In response, another patron agreed, adding a statement as if from staff, "*we can work through it.*" The first patron similarly added,

we're here to help you the best way we can... let's see what we can help with, let's see where we can refer you out. Let us be here together to help you and partner with you," adding, "*Hey, did you get to go over to the Career Center? Were they able to help you?*"

Providing some context for the need they go on to say that some patrons don't

know how to use the computer. They don't know anything about making a resume. They don't know what website to go look on, you know. They struggle and then they get up and walk out and leave. And you know they're angry.

Through participation at the FRCs, patrons have access to knowledgeable staff to support them and help overcome such challenges. When asked how the FRC could support families with open child welfare cases one patron who clarified that she didn't know if this was already happening at the FRCs, described what this may look like:

As a new teacher, you get a mentor ... checking up on you every week, "Hey, is there anything you want to talk to me about that, anyways I can help you improve your job, you know, because you're new to this." So maybe if certain parents, depending on the situation of the case, of course. Can have someone check ... "hey did you, how's it going, did you make it to that anger management meeting that's scheduled for next week? I'm just checking on you to make sure that you have your, you know, you're remembering that." Or "hey, you know that parenting class you was supposed to take. Look, you're going to do good, you know, you're going to take it right? because you know, you know you can do this." Just a coach ... so in certain cases they've already had trouble managing life. Now they need someone to help coach them.

It was not unusual for patrons in the feedback groups to be unaware of the full extent of services provided at their FRCs due to the dynamic and responsive nature of one-on-one services. For instance, a patron without caregiving responsibilities would only have a casual understanding that there are services for kids, whereas a caregiver may have more extensive knowledge of homework help and summer school programs.

Increasing capacity at FRCs to have additional caseworkers to take time to provide this support may benefit caregivers with open cases, as one patron suggests:

I'm going to speak on we're assuming in the perfect world that we have open option to what can be available: some more caseworkers... but sometimes also the families are, if they know you're a case worker, they're not going to open up to you. They're not going to try to, they think that you are like the enemy. So having someone here that could maybe merge with that family and say, let's look at your case plan. Because then the parent can have a copy of their case plan. Let's look at what's going on and let's go down these things.

After taking a moment to acknowledge the lived experience of another participant in the feedback group, one caregiver suggested the importance of providing childcare so caregivers can focus on the support provided to them:

This is stressful for her, you know, having to deal with that, with DCF. But one thing that I think having the resources for children to be happy for a while and parents to be able to interact does reduce stress so that domestic violence goes down, communication, loving interaction between children and parents goes up. And so DCF is not involved in that respect at least.

Additionally, as caregivers gain more knowledge and connect to resources in the community, one patron had a suggestion that after finishing a community class patrons receive:

...some kind of certificate or something to give them, to present them, because they have a case open, they can also show the worker: look I'm trying, you know... I'm reaching out, out to the resources in the community, you know, and it will go a long ways, it really would.

This idea was greatly supported by the other participating patrons in the feedback group and is a standard practice after PSF led classes for patrons.

There was also agreement that there are stresses that exist within families in the community because people aren't getting the support that they need to deal with mental wellness.

One patron who agreed provided a hypothetical example, stating:

And the frustration level goes up. And they don't have healthy coping skills to start with because they were never taught that. And so, you know, then DCF comes in because they rattled their kid half to death because they're so frustrated. They don't have anybody to talk to. They don't know where to go. They don't know who to call. It can be a difficult situation.

Emotional Support

What may be among a caregiver's most difficult life events, having an open child welfare case can reportedly feel confusing and stressful. This subtheme represents the ways in which patrons felt the FRCs could provide caregivers with open child welfare cases support through showing empathy and compassion. The eight relevant statements were from five patrons at CPLRC (n = 3), LPRC (n = 1) and NSFRC (n = 1). One patron from the LPRC agreed that services provided at the FRCs could prevent involvement in the child welfare system and said, *"So you can get some support before you get to the point where you want to choke somebody."*

The remaining seven statements shared suggestions for how FRCs might provide support to caregivers who had an open child welfare case or felt they had to maintain vigilance to keep from having a case. One patron spoke succinctly stating *"the only thing you can do is like keep supporting them"* as they may experience shock or depression. Similarly, another patron shared:

I think that parents need to be reassured that they, because you feel powerless, you know, because you, your kid just got taken away from you. It's like you don't have no more say so or nothing you know, and you feel powerless.... They can feel some kind of compassion, love, care that they, they haven't lost their power. Later adding, Yes, yes, and compassion, you know, showing it, you know.

This compassionate, emotional support, as suggested by one patron, can also manifest as actions that follow up, *"It doesn't necessarily mean a full-time staff but somebody who's available, so you can give them a call, give them their name and they can meet on one-on-one or whatever."* Another suggested support included the need for spaces where children could be cared for while the caregivers were accessing services.

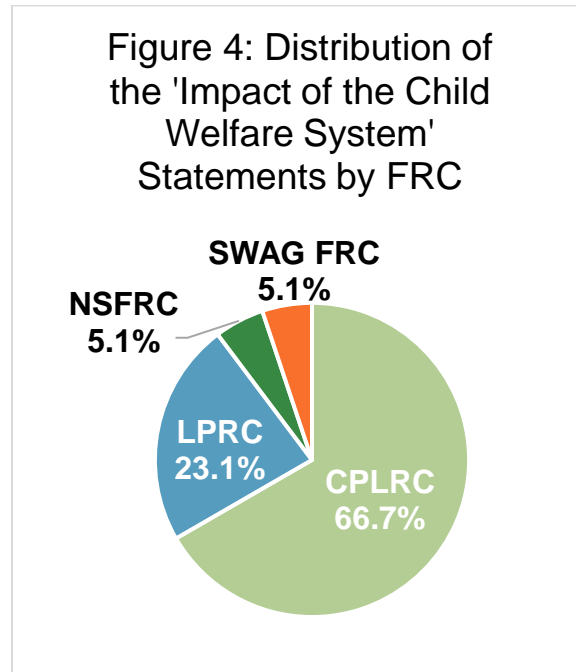
Similar to the suggestion in the knowledgeable support subtheme to have a tangible certification when completing classes, a patron suggests that one way staff can provide emotional support is through tangible letters which speak to the character of the caregiver.

We're talking about that supporting part, I would think that I would have people that would really testify of who, what kind of character that you have and that is not you. ... You need to have them people even write letters or whatever. ... That could, can help in a

lot of situations...From what I'm understanding is that the person I spoke for, it helped their situation because you got to say who this person is, their, their whole character has a whole lot to do with who you are and how you live and your lifestyle is the main thing.

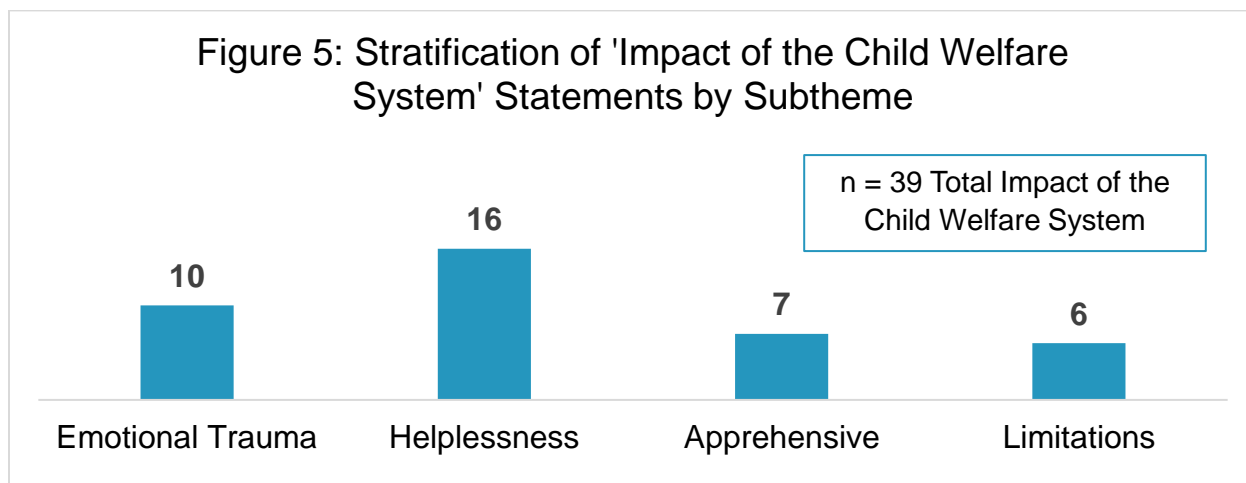
Theme Two: Impact of the Child Welfare System

While some patrons in this subtheme (4 out of 11, or 36%) directly addressed the question, "*Do you think that your FRC resources have helped caregivers in the community from being involved with the child welfare system?*", many others shared their thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions about that system. Every patron who directly answered the question, including at least two patrons speaking at once, agreed that FRC resources could or have helped caregivers in the community avoid involvement with the child welfare system. Some responded with a resounding "*yeah, definitely,*" while others agreed and delved into the nuanced complexity of needs. Patrons frequently shared the impact of their personal experiences or beliefs about the system, in some cases becoming emotional when recounting their experiences. This theme highlights those experiences and the overall impact of the child welfare system on the lives of these patrons. Furthermore, it explores certain limitations linked to both the child welfare system and the FRCs.



Though a variety of patrons spoke of the impact of the child welfare system, this theme was discussed most at CPLRC (66.7%) and LPRC (23.1%) (see Figure 4). Statements were provided by 14 patron participants at CPLRC (n = 5), NSFRC (n = 5), LPRC (n = 1), and SWAG FRC (n = 3).

Four subthemes were identified from the statements associated with this theme: emotional trauma, helplessness, feeling apprehensive, and limitations of the child welfare system and FRCs. Each of these subthemes reflects the sentiments and convictions regarding the impact of the child welfare system. In certain instances, due to the intricate and multi-layered nature of emotional responses, similarities arise within these subthemes. Figure 5 illustrates the total number of statements highlighting these feelings and beliefs, separated into subthemes.



Emotional Trauma

In response to the research question of this report, five patrons at CPLRC (n = 4) and LPRC (n = 1) provided 10 statements which highlighted the reported perceptions and experiences they had about the child welfare system. This subtheme explores how some individuals may have perceived their experiences as traumatic and how these experiences triggered specific emotions, such as anger, stress, fear, and depression, due to their involvement with the child welfare system. Some patrons spoke from their personal experiences, while others spoke of people in their lives or their perceptions.

One mother disclosed her previous experience having a child welfare case open for a year and the emotions she felt including being *"livid, mad, angry, hurt"* and *"it was hard. it was hard."* While not every patron had firsthand experience with the child welfare system, there was a notable receptivity and understanding toward the negative emotions associated with it.

Pondering on an earlier stage of life, one patron shared her previous feelings, *"I hated them [DCF]. I'll tell you the truth, I really did. And because... it indeed put fear in you."* As time has passed and she has gained life experiences, her perception of child welfare workers has softened. Her advice for FRCs is a balance of these life experiences:

Doing the best, doing the best you can to removing the fear. Because I noticed that a lot of people, when you mention some DCF or something they get fear "oh they trying to

take my child I ain't gonna be able to get my child back, they take my child ain't going to get my child back," you know.

One patron spoke hypothetically of how FRCs could support parents who have trouble managing their lives and have had children removed from their homes saying *"they're depressed and just feel like you said, hopeless. Anyway, so they might need somebody to just say "hey, you could, you could do this."*

A mother with lived experiences shared her surprise at getting a child welfare case and the resulting depression which followed. She reiterated twice that she didn't want to lose her children, sharing *"I'm not trying to lose my kids, they're my lifeline."* She went on to share personal details regarding how having children inspired her to turn her life around from that of crime, prostitution, and living on the streets.

Lastly, stress was reportedly experienced both in dealing with the child welfare system and general wariness in society of that system.

Helplessness

The largest number of statements, (n = 16 or 41%), regarding the impact of the child welfare system came from eight patrons at CPLRC (n = 3), LPRC (n = 4) and NSFRC (n = 1). They highlight some of the ways patrons reportedly experience helplessness during interactions with or apprehension of the child welfare system.

Two patrons described feeling overwhelmed by circumstances believed to be beyond their control, resulting in the initiation of an open child welfare case. The first mother with lived experience shared how sudden and jarring the experience can be, *"After all these years, like you never had a DCF and then boom, something did happen out of the blue someday. You couldn't prevent nothing, and it just seemed right downhill, like straight depression."* The second patron responded with her own disclosure of a circumstance also believed to be outside of her control,

describing her experience as “*Yeah, it's like a gun to your head cocked already.*” In both cases, these strong perspectives relay a feeling of helplessness.

Reportedly, ambiguity and confusion as to what to expect or why things are progressing as they are can have an emotional toll, leading to patrons feeling helpless. In one grandmother’s efforts to meet the requirements necessary to close her case, she was surprised to learn that she needed to continue to meet with her case manager for an entire year. At one point, presumably after several visits and seeing a safe environment, both the caseworker and she reportedly expressed confusion as to why the case, including home visits, had to continue for an entire year. She explained that during that year “*I felt on P's and Q's, I mean on needles for that year, because I'm like, nothing can happen no more here.*” When the year was up, she shared “*Honey, I was so relieved because I had never been through, nothing like that and... it was hard.*”

Difficulty complying with case requirements also reportedly increased some feelings of helplessness. Giving a hypothetical example of a caregiver that already had trouble managing life, one patron said, “*Now your children are taken, and you have a list of things that you have to do to get your children back. You've already had issues managing life, how are you going to manage this list?*”

Other stated difficulties include transportation and unemployment. As one patron shared a hypothetical experienced informed by her years as a caseworker,

One of the issues is families that are involved in DCF, transportation or not working... It's that loophole of you can't get to a job if you don't have a car. You can't get a car if you don't have money.

Mental health struggles may also be an added difficulty as explained by one patron in this hypothetical example:

And the frustration level goes up. And they don't have healthy coping skills to start with because they were never taught that. And so, you know, then DCF comes in because they rattled their kid half to death because they're so frustrated. They don't have anybody to

talk to. They don't know where to go. They don't know who to call. It can be a difficult situation.

One mother with lived experience found it not just difficult, but impossible to comply with child welfare case requirements, adding to a feeling of helplessness. During the discussion, she spoke of an open case she had, as well as a case a friend of hers had. Reportedly, her friend complied with all necessary requirements, however, was not awarded custody of her child. Due to personal experiences like this, she shared her belief that efforts “*don't be enough for the Department of Children and Families.*” This patron’s perspective may encompass the fear and helplessness felt by some caregivers facing involvement or currently involved with the formal child welfare system as they feel:

whatever DCF choose, is what they choose, whatever they want to do, what they want to do, it's up to them. Like if they want to close they [the caregivers] case out, they can close it. If they don't, they don't.

However, when asked what the FRCs could do to support families with open cases she praised the FRCs as doing “*more than enough*” and maintained “*there's nothing more they [FRCs] can do. DCF is going to do what they want to do regardless.*”

Possibly stemming from a sense of helplessness, four patrons in the LPRC feedback group articulated statements that underscore a shared narrative of the need to remain vigilant to prevent child welfare involvement. One mother recounted an incident in which her home was investigated due to a reported misunderstanding and how “*They still periodically check*” leading her to “*make sure that I have food in my house.*” Even though the incident had nothing to do with a lack of food in the home, the need to prevent any further incident loomed great. One patron agreed with the need to have a full pantry of groceries saying, “*In case they pop in before you go grocery shopping and say you're starving the kid*” which was responded with several “*exactly*” and one “*it happened to me before*” statements from other patrons. Another patron agreed that DCF could arrive unannounced, and you had to be on your “*P's and Q's.*”

Preparing for periodic checks, the mother above discussed how she struggles to make the best choices for her family on a limiting budget. Because her children have sensitivities to what they can eat and options are limited at food pantries, she shared how she has to get creative with the funds she has saying, “*Now I got to take my light bill money to make sure I got groceries in the house. So now I got to go ask somebody to help me with my electric bill.*” Acknowledging these concerns, one caregiver shared how FRC services may lead to interpersonal support in these tough situations. When asked if she believed that child protection concerns would go down if services could be provided to help parents interact, she agreed saying:

Yes. And parents feel supported, and they feel like they have somebody they can call to talk to. When DCF shows up and you just ran out to the store for a second and there’s not, you know, 500 happy meals in the fridge and they’re looking at you like you’re a misfit grandparent, you know, you can call ... and go “do you know what they did?”

In summary, while the FRCs aim to prevent involvement in the formal child welfare system, there may be limitations to their reach and ability to remove feelings of helplessness.

Nevertheless, patrons often identified services and supports throughout the feedback groups that FRCs can still offer to families in need.

Apprehensive

There were seven total statements which highlighted apprehensive feelings of two patrons at CPLRC. Apprehensiveness is being anxious or fearful that something bad or unpleasant will happen. In the case of these two patrons, the apprehension to give their personal information, especially social security numbers and dates of birth, when accessing services created a concern. For one patron, three out of their five comments which highlighted their apprehensions included agreement that FRC resources have helped caregivers prevent or minimize chances of being involved with the child welfare system:

Yeah, but then you be skeptical because, I be skeptical because I come down for food and hygiene stuff like I be wondering do they report me because I know y'all are involved with Partnership, you know what I'm saying? So, I be wondering, do y'all report this type of stuff to Department of Children and Families?

“So it...minimized a lot, but do still set off concerns like wondering. It's just really getting reported and how would these people feel about me getting this free service also type stuff”

Yes But you still have that concern in the back of your head like what's really going on? Like if I go get this service here from her or this food for her ...put my name on this paper and yall report it back to DCF, partnership family and they go again like ‘oh she gettin food stamps what she doing?’ [as in response to being asked this] ‘baby im putting all the food in the house, I got growing babies I got growing kids and I cook everyday.’

Both patrons expressed that they didn’t understand why the information was being collected or how it was being used, causing concern. The other patron in conversation with the first, adds:

And it shouldn't be reported. It shouldn't because hey they know, I am quite sure they know when they're giving out these benefits it's not enough like my days of getting it, it was not enough. I did not, I had to rely on my child support to go finish buying more groceries for the rest of the month and you know, things like that. So, I'm just hoping and praying it's not [reported to DCF] you know for the sake of everybody that does get it.

It is important to highlight that services at the FRCs are free and patrons can still receive services even if they are unwilling to provide sign in information. Additionally, FRC staff do not request social security numbers as part of the sign in process. It is also important to highlight that neither the Florida Department of Children and Families, nor the Partnership for Strong Families considers poverty, alone, an indicator of child maltreatment, therefore patrons accessing services and supports from the FRCs are not reported to the Florida Abuse Hotline for merely accessing services when no allegations of maltreatment are disclosed.¹

¹ Poverty is not listed as neglect by the Florida statutes. "Neglect" occurs when a child is deprived of, or is allowed to be deprived of, necessary food, clothing, shelter, or medical treatment or a child is permitted to live in an environment when such deprivation or environment causes the child’s physical, mental, or emotional health to be significantly impaired or to be in danger of being significantly impaired. The foregoing circumstances shall not be considered neglect if caused primarily by financial inability unless actual services for relief have been offered to and rejected by such person. Florida Statutes, Title V: Judicial Branch, Chapter 39: Proceedings Related to Children, Section 39.01(50). Available at: http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0000-0099/0039/0039.html

Limitations

There were six statements which showed the limitations of the child welfare system and the FRCs from four patrons at CPLRC (n = 2), NSFRC (n = 1), and SWAG FRC (n = 1). One patron, speaking hypothetically shared the imagined stress and strain child welfare system employees are thought to be under as a limitation:

I feel like one of the things just like ... as a human it ... just it hits your heart hard. So, I would imagine as a child protective investigator at some point you, you become a little bit desensitized just so you can function. And so, it could seem cold...because you're desensitized. You've seen it all, and you want to cope. You have to sleep at night.

An additional strain may be the reported stigma that child welfare workers experience. One patron recounted having previously hated child welfare workers but came to learn that “DCF, they have had a bad stigma put on them, you know about taking their kids you know and not giving their kids back.” She goes on to explain that her experience helping her friend adopt and getting custody of her grandchildren has allowed her to see the other side of DCF:

I got to know a whole lot of inside people and the people that was on the board and stuff and it's nothing like what the stigma says it is, you know it's nothing ... but the thing is everybody don't, don't know this.

From one patron's perspective, the primary obstacle to aiding caregivers involved with the child welfare system was the need to broaden the scope of their local Family Resource Center.

The parents are de-stressing, first of all, so they don't do any harmful thing to their child, or to have DCF come in and with them de-stressing they're learning how to cope with their child. So, I think all we have to do is expand our program a little bit here and it would just help in general.

Two patrons at SWAG FRC in different feedback groups discussed the lack of service access as a limitation. One of which after sharing her agreement that the more support is given to families, the less likely will be their involvement with DCF offered a concern for those children who have moved out of the area and no longer accessing services. The other patron, in a different feedback group, shared her belief that:

the people that are at risk of being involved in child welfare don't even come here. They don't even come to the, the people that are at risk of actually being involved in child welfare, their children will come here before they come here.

In one feedback group, there were five statements from two patrons which were not counted in the 'impact of the child welfare system' theme because they represent outlier experiences. These patrons did not agree that the supports and services that are provided at the FRCs could help prevent some families from getting involved in the child welfare system. With emphasis, the above patron declares that FRCs cannot prevent involvement in the child welfare system but adds they can "help you make your way better." Their statements were given with personal experience and community observations such as:

Once you come in and find out what SWAG is when it comes to the youth, we know that they are a part of Partnership for Strong Families, and the families do know what that means in the Alachua County community, but sadly the people that really should come and check us out, they won't, and they don't.

"They don't wanna, like, 'I don't want nobody in my business type situation.'"

No...The children have to have more sense than the parents. The people that need to come here and, and talk with Meridian, they don't come here. They'll go over there [convenience store] and get their beer. They'll go over there and get their cigarettes. They'll go over there and get whatever they need to continue to cope with their struggle. They won't come over here and get the resources that could help them uplift their children.

She shared her personal insight, recounting a time when her involvement with the child welfare system offered support that she otherwise wouldn't have received, as it reportedly led to her being prioritized and moved to the top of the housing list.

The other patron who expressed disagreement simply highlights the limitations of the FRC in complex situations saying:

It can't because what's going on at the house. This really can't prevent the welfare system from coming to their home because this is a whole nother [situation]. This right here could help you, could help your child in different ways, but what's going on at the house is a whole nother case. A whole nother situation. These people over here are a resource. This is a family. This is for our community.

They go on to share that in cases of witnessing abuse, SWAG staff, as mandatory reporters will report known instances of abuse:

If a person here sees abuse, us being caregivers and people that work here, we see abuse? Yes, we can bring welfare, dang sure in your home because them children are being mistreated. You see bruises on a child? Oh yeah, I bring the SWAG got a right to do that.

Summary

The patron feedback groups revealed two dominant themes across all FRC's when asked the question: *Do you think that your FRC resources have helped caregivers in the community from being involved with the child welfare system?*

The theme "FRC support" received the second highest number of statements, following the second theme. It is notable that in the patron feedback groups, when asked about the potential of FRCs in preventing child welfare involvement, responses predominantly highlighted the profound impact of the Child Welfare System on their lives. This impact was characterized by emotional trauma, helplessness, and apprehension. Conversely, positive aspects of FRC support emerged, including the provision of services, knowledgeable assistance, and emotional support.

References

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