

# 2021 Data Reveals Positive Outcomes for Family Engagement Initiative Participating Counties

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Established by the Pennsylvania State Roundtable in 2017 and supported by the Office of Children and Families in the Courts, the Family Engagement Initiative (FEI) is designed to assist select counties in furthering collaborative efforts between dependency courts and child welfare agencies to enhance meaningful family involvement in the child dependency system. The FEI has three components that build upon the Permanency Practice Initiative. Those components are: Enhanced Legal Representation, Family Finding-Revised and Crisis/Rapid Response Family Meetings.

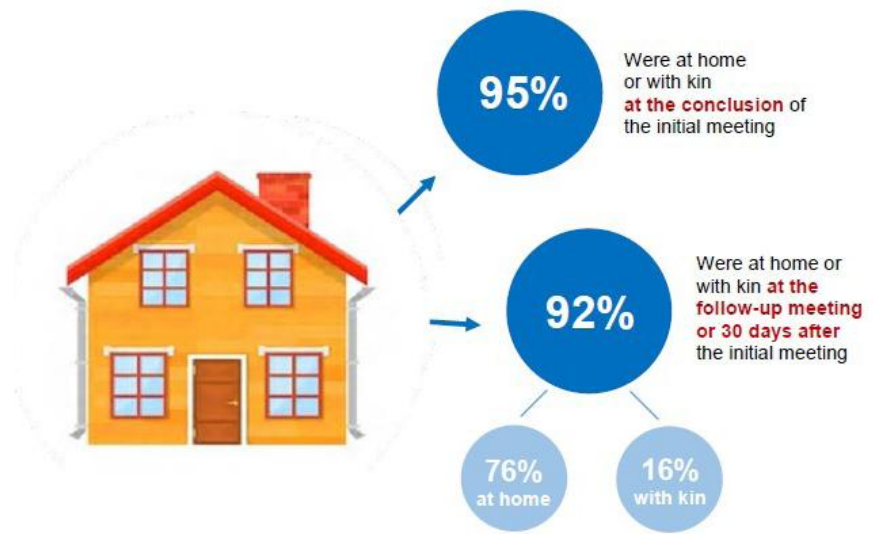
Now in its fifth year, the FEI is operational in 18 Pennsylvania counties serving over 44 percent of Pennsylvania's dependent children. The participating counties are Beaver, Blair, Bradford, Butler, Clinton, Dauphin, Fayette, Lackawanna, Lehigh, Lycoming, Northampton, Northumberland, Philadelphia, Snyder, Tioga, Union, Venango and Washington.

During the 2022 Pennsylvania State Roundtable meeting held in June, the 2021 FEI Data Report was shared with State Roundtable members. This report includes the cumulative efforts and data elements of 15 FEI counties, excluding Philadelphia because of its size, and the three counties that just started the FEI in 2022 (Bradford, Lycoming, and Washington).

The outcomes continue to be encouraging for FEI counties individually, collectively and, in comparison to non-FEI counties. One of the key components of the initiative is Crisis/Rapid Response Family Meetings. These family meetings involve gathering family and kin quickly following an emergency that might otherwise result in a child being placed out of home. The goal of either a Crisis (immediate to within 24 hours of the

## CRISIS/RAPID RESPONSE FAMILY MEETINGS: FOLLOW-UP PLACEMENT

Of the **1,337** children who had a meeting in 2021...



emergent event) or a Rapid (between 25-72 hours) Response Family Meeting is for the family to address the urgent concern and develop a plan to either safely keep the child in their home or if placement must happen, place the child with someone they know and love.

The majority of these meetings result in children not entering the court system, but for those who do, the family's plan must be presented at the shelter care hearing so the judge can consider what the family believes is in the best interest of the child.

From 2018-2020, these family meetings exceeded expectations with positive results. The 2021 data continues to show very impressive outcomes. There were 676 meetings held serving 1,337 children. Of those meetings held, 85 percent had more family in attendance than professionals (one of the requirements of the meetings). At the conclusion of the meetings, for those

children who were at home at the time of the meeting, 95 percent of children were able to safely remain at home or be placed with kin, with the vast majority safely staying home (79 percent). Follow-up data revealed that 30-days post meeting, 92 percent remained at home or with someone they love.

"As you can observe from the collection of data, these meetings are taking the government out from important family decisions and returning the power to the ever-increasing definition of our "family and kin," said Pa. Supreme Court Justice **Kevin Dougherty**. "Our success has kept families together and reduced trauma connected to the removal of children to stranger care!"

Of the children under court supervision, the percent of cases that were court involved for 24 months or less (from point of adjudication forward) was 70 percent in FEI counties compared to 60 percent

in non-FEI counties. FEI counties also have a larger number of children by percentage in kinship care (55 percent) compared to non-FEI counties (40 percent). In FEI counties, more children are reunified (41 percent compared to 31 percent), and fewer age out (7 percent compared to 13 percent).

While Philadelphia County is not included in the 2021 report, its outcomes match other FEI counties' positive results.

"Philadelphia began FEI implementation in 2020 and was fully implemented by December 2021 and we are pleased with the results we are seeing so far," said the Hon.

Margaret T. Murphy, administrative judge, Philadelphia Family Division. "The FEI takes a total system effort -- judicial, child welfare, attorneys and providers -- to work together for the best interest of children and families."

In 2021, Philadelphia County held 578 Crisis/Rapid Response Family Meetings serving 890 children, decreased its overall number of children in out-of-home care by 20 percent, increased kinship care and reduced the use of both foster and congregate care placements.

To access the FEI 2021 Data Report [click here](#).

## Bench Dedicated to Honor Allegheny Judge Zottola

A bench dedication ceremony was held in late June to honor the memory of Judge **John Zottola**, former judge of Allegheny County Veterans Court. The bench dedication occurred at the Allegheny County Courthouse and was attended by family, friends, and his "court family." Judge Zottola helped to change the lives of hundreds of veterans along with being a well-respected colleague by his staff.

Speakers at the event included **Jill E. Rangos** (administrative judge Criminal Division) Hon. **Bruce R. Beemer**, Deb Barnisin Lange (assistant district attorney) and Mary Frances Pilarski (coordinator of health care for homeless veterans at the VA Pittsburgh). A speaker from the ceremony mentioned that Judge Zottola worked tirelessly to do more for justice-involved persons who entered his courtroom, especially those suffering mental illness.

To honor Judge Zottola and his work, the Veterans Court partners, and the Veterans Court Team, were honored to announce the inception of the Hon. John A. Zottola "Service to Veterans Court Award," to be given annually in his honor at Veterans Court graduation, in memory of his contributions to treatment courts and service to veterans.



*Common Pleas and federal judges, including President Judge Kim Berkeley Clark, stand with the bench made to honor Judge John Zottola.*

