

# Concurrent Planning

A Guide for Judges, Attorneys, and Others  
Working with Children & Families

## What is Concurrent Planning?

When children must be removed from their homes because of abuse or neglect, New Mexico Children, Youth & Families Department (CYFD) staff work to establish **permanency** for those children as soon as possible. The first choice for permanency is almost always reunification, safely returning the child to the home of his or her parent or legal guardian. Unfortunately, that is not always possible.

**Concurrent Planning** is a process that allows CYFD to provide reunification services to the child and the family **at the same time** as CYFD works on an alternative plan, such as adoption, permanent guardianship, or placement with a fit and willing relative. In the past, child welfare workers have focused their early efforts on attempting to rehabilitate parents and return children home. Only after those efforts were proven unsuccessful were alternative permanency plans identified and implemented. Through Concurrent Planning, a child can be placed in a permanent home more quickly.

If a case is determined to be appropriate for Concurrent Planning, an effort is made to find an available **Concurrent Planning Family** which is a good match for the child. A Concurrent Planning Family is one that is willing to work with the birth family and CYFD toward reunification and also willing to adopt the child if reunification cannot be accomplished and adoption is the alternative plan.



Concurrent Planning was developed in the early 1990s by Lutheran Social Services of Washington and Idaho and the Washington Division of Children and Family Services (Linda Katz, Norma Spoonmore, and Chris Robinson). Today, the concepts of Concurrent Planning are being used in numerous states and other jurisdictions across the country. Concurrent Planning is identified in the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) as a *best practice*.

## Why has New Mexico adopted Concurrent Planning?

The New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) is committed to providing permanency for each child in its care as quickly as possible, while also ensuring safety and well-being. Concurrent Planning has been shown to reduce the length of time a child must remain in foster care and to minimize the negative impact of separation and loss.

CYFD has implemented the Concurrent Planning Model in order to achieve earlier permanency for children in foster care. Concurrent Planning has also been shown to:

- reduce the number of foster care placements and relationship disruptions;
- reduce the child's length of time in care;
- increase voluntary terminations (relinquishments) and open adoptions;
- improve long term adjustments of children;
- minimize the negative impact of separation and loss;
- increase the continuity of family and sibling relationships.



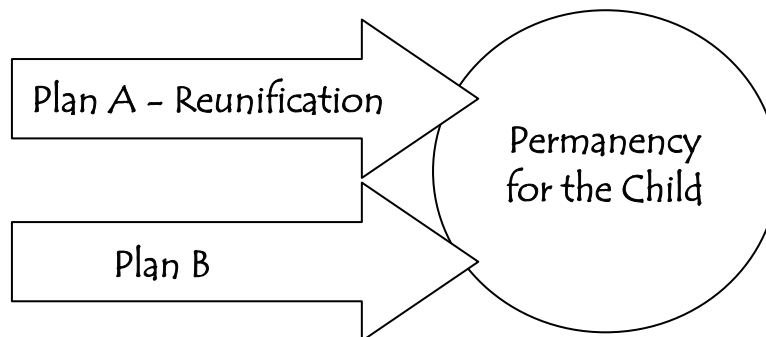
The Concurrent Planning Model is consistent with CYFD's commitment to Family-Centered Practice. In Concurrent Planning, parents are actively involved in decision-making and are given candid feedback throughout the process. Both approaches require accurate assessments and culturally sensitive interviewing.

Concurrent Planning is also consistent with CYFD's utilization of Family Group Decision Making and Team Decision Making, both of which involve the extended family in planning for the child. Family Group Decision Making and Team Decision Making can be used in conjunction with Concurrent Planning to develop support for the parents as they work to make the changes required to have their children returned home and to identify options for an alternative permanency plan, should reunification not be possible.

## Operating Principles

Concurrent Planning is based on eight basic concepts, or **operating principles**:

1. **Differential Diagnosis:** Screening and assessment tools are used to identify which children are likely to return home and which are not, and to determine whether or not a case is appropriate for Concurrent Planning.
2. **Success Redefined:** Workers and others involved in child abuse and neglect cases rethink how they define success, understanding that reunification is only one option. Permanency for the child is the goal. Success is safely placing the child in a permanent home as soon as possible.
3. **Plan A and Plan B:** Once a case is determined to be appropriate for Concurrent Planning, work begins on two plans simultaneously. Plan A is always *reunification*. Plan B is an alternative permanency plan, including adoption, guardianship, and placement with a fit and willing relative.



4. **Full Disclosure:** Openness with all the parties is critical to the success of Concurrent Planning. The birth family, Concurrent Planning Family, judge, attorneys, and even the child if appropriate, must know that there are two plans for the child. The birth parents must understand what is expected of them to have their child returned home. They must be told that if they do not meet those expectations, the alternative plan for their child may become the primary permanency plan and the focus of permanency efforts for the child.

5. **Forensic Social Work:** *Forensic Social Work* refers to the application of social work to a legal situation, social work that is legally sound and suitable for the court. According to Linda



Katz, one of the developers of Concurrent Planning, a good social work case plan is a good legal plan. This means the CYFD Worker must document all information pertaining to a case as the case progresses, including CYFD's reasonable efforts toward reunification. Detailed documentation will provide the attorneys and the judge with the information they need to move forward with an alternate plan.

6. **Behavior, Not Promises:** Birth parents must do more than make *promises*. They must make *progress* by changing the behaviors that caused the removal of their child. Lack of cooperation, failure to comply with the treatment, failure to appear at court and at required meetings could result in the alternative permanent plan becoming the primary plan.
7. **Written Agreements:** The birth parents and the CYFD Worker negotiate the steps that must be taken for the child to be returned home, and put those steps into a written agreement. This agreement makes clear what is expected of the parents and what CYFD will do. A written agreement can empower birth parents and help them focus on measurable tasks.
8. **Visitation:** In order for a reunification plan to succeed, the maximum visitation possible must be arranged. Although this can be a difficult and time-consuming task, it is critical for all involved in the case. It helps the child maintain a bond with his/her birth parents and provides the parents a chance to share information and practice some of their new skills and behaviors. It also allows the worker an opportunity to assess progress.

## How are cases selected for Concurrent Planning?

No later than 30 days after a child comes into CYFD custody, the case is screened for Concurrent Planning, using the **Concurrent Planning Screening Matrix**. This Matrix is a checklist of ten items regarding the child and family history in terms of abuse or neglect. If any item is checked “Yes,” the case is considered “screened in.” Once a case “screens in,” the CYFD Worker completes the **Early Prognostic Assessment**, which includes two worksheets for each parent: the Strengths in Families Worksheet and the Poor Prognosis Indicator Worksheet.

At the **Concurrent Planning Conference**, the CYFD Child Protective Services (CPS) Consultant and the CYFD Worker and/or Supervisor use the findings of the Early Prognostic Assessment to decide whether or not the case should become a Concurrent Planning case and, if so, to identify the alternative permanent plan.



## How are Concurrent Planning homes established?

Concurrent Planning is based on the assumption that every child will be placed in a home that can become his or her permanent home if reunification is not possible. Therefore CYFD is working hard to recruit, prepare, and support families who are willing to take the risks and make the commitment required by Concurrent Planning.

Prospective foster or adoptive parents are informed that Concurrent Planning may be an option, and the CYFD Worker describes the risks and responsibilities involved. The foster or adoptive parents are told that they must be willing to support two permanency plans (including the intensive services and visitation required) and that contact with the birth family is necessary. They are also told that they will be required to sign an Intent to Adopt form, if the alternative plan is adoption and reunification proves not to be possible. They are fully informed that parental rights might not be terminated, and the child might not be freed for adoption.

If a family agrees to become a Concurrent Planning Family, they are given all pertinent information about the child and his/her circumstances, and provided ongoing support. They are included in case staffings, court hearings, and other meetings. They are considered essential partners in case management activities.

## What else is needed to implement Concurrent Planning?

Everyone who works with children and families in abuse or neglect cases needs to understand and accept the concepts of Concurrent Planning as a creative and responsible way to achieve permanency for the child. The support of the courts, attorneys, and advocates is absolutely necessary to the success of Concurrent Planning.

### Judges

Treatment plans ordered by the court must reflect both permanency plans, and must incorporate the intensive services and visitation required. Specifically, judges need to:

- ensure that the parents are fully aware of both permanency plans, and inform them from the bench about the consequences of not complying with their treatment plan;
- involve the Concurrent Planning Family in hearings and reviews;
- require thorough documentation of parent compliance and CYFD efforts; and
- make timely reasonable efforts determinations.

### Respondent Attorneys

Respondent Attorneys must ensure that their clients understand both permanency plans. They need to inform their clients of the consequences of not complying with the treatment plan. Respondent Attorneys should participate in case staffings and other planning activities and encourage their clients to be actively involved.

### Youth Attorneys and GALs

Youth Attorneys and GALs (if the child is old enough) must ensure that their clients understand both permanency plans and why both plans are necessary. The Youth Attorney must represent the youth's wishes in court, and the GAL must represent the child's best interests. Both the Youth Attorney and the GAL should participate in case staffings and other planning activities.

### CASA Volunteers

CASA Volunteers need to understand the importance of reunification while accepting the concept of simultaneously working on an alternative plan. They should support the planning that takes place along both tracks toward permanency. The CASA's unbiased report on family progress will help inform the judge and others as they work to make the best case planning decisions for the child and family.

## Concurrent Planning

Concurrent Planning allows CYFD Child Protective Services to work on two permanency plans simultaneously in order to achieve permanency for the child as quickly as possible. But CYFD can't do it alone. Concurrent Planning requires the understanding and support of judges, GALs, Youth Attorneys, Respondent Attorneys, CASA Volunteers, and others.

This booklet will introduce you to the goals of Concurrent Planning, the basic principles, and the process. It will also give you some ideas of how you could be involved.

For more information on Concurrent Planning:

in Santa Fe, call Kathy Heidel, 505-827-7450

in Las Cruces, call David Lavetts, 505-524-6400 ext. 106

in Albuquerque, call Barbara Purcella, 505-841-2924



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contact the Administrative Office of the Courts; 505-827-4800.