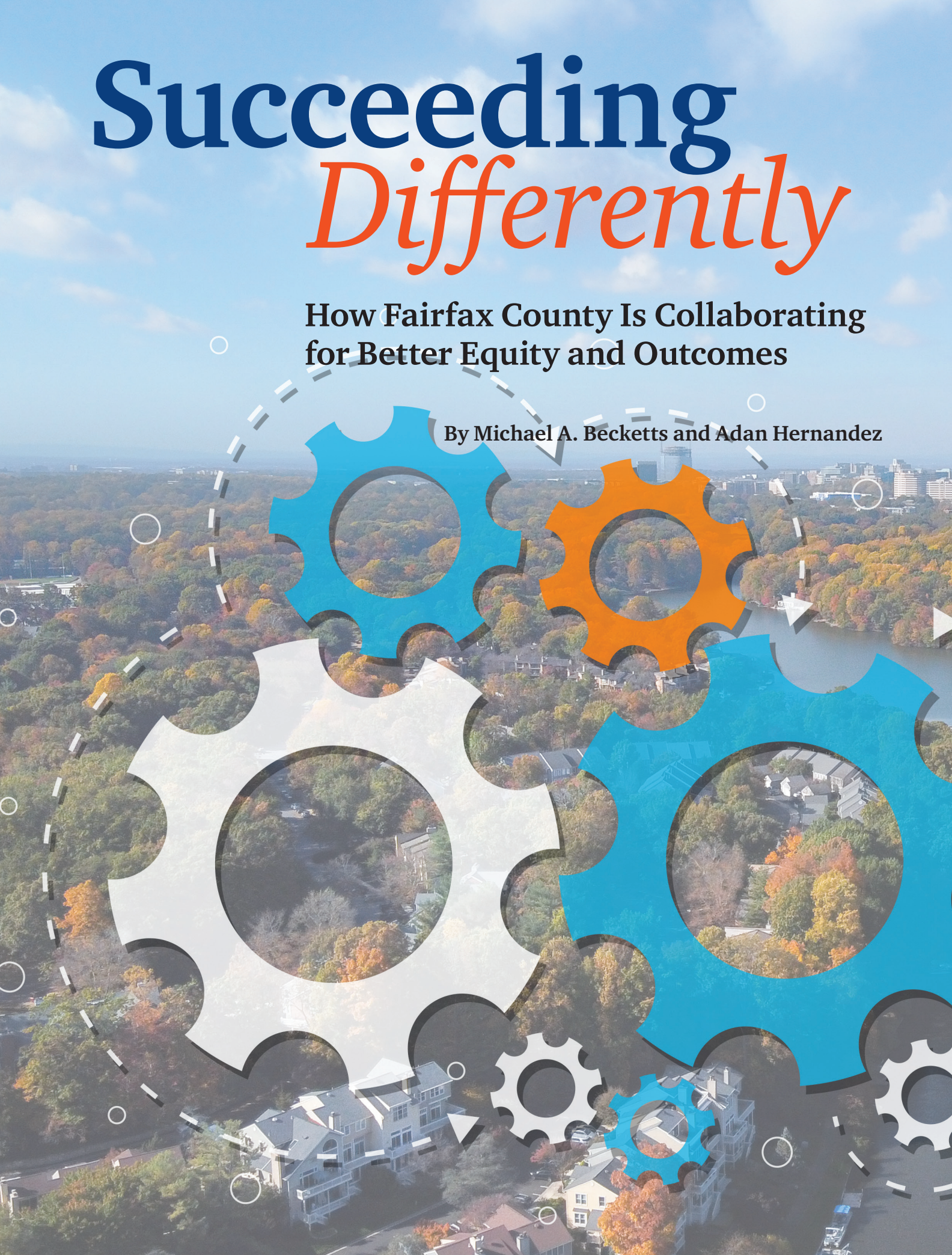


Succeeding *Differently*

How Fairfax County Is Collaborating
for Better Equity and Outcomes

By Michael A. Becketts and Adan Hernandez



In 2017, the Fairfax County Department of Family Services' Children, Youth and Families Division committed to significantly changing the way we respond to allegations of abuse and neglect, partner with families, address systemic barriers adversely impacting communities of color, and partner strategically with our community stakeholders. Despite a strong vision, we struggled to maintain a dual focus on transforming for tomorrow while ensuring children's safety today. We believe many child welfare agencies experience similar challenges in any change journey. We also believe we've found a solution.



The Fairfax County Department of Family Services' (DFS) Children, Youth and Families (CYF) Division has been working to redesign our practice and engagement with families for several years. In 2017, and after careful evaluation, Fairfax County DFS adopted the Safe & Connected™ Practice Model. This evidence-informed practice incorporates diverse perspectives that enable evaluations through an equity- and trauma-informed lens. To do so, the model integrates critical thinking, applied knowledge and research, collaborative practice across the child welfare delivery system (courts, county attorneys, education, mental health, housing), comprehensive assessment, and a fundamental focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

By adopting the Safe & Connected™ model, we aimed to change how we approach child welfare services and to reduce the system's historically disproportionate impact on children and families of color. It was the best option for supporting our guiding equity statement: *The Department of Family Services (DFS) is committed to addressing institutional racism in its core responsibility to support the safety, health, and wellness of county residents. DFS recognizes systemic oppression and institutional racism have contributed to*

disparities in opportunities for county residents to succeed. DFS will support equitable outcomes by examining its policies, practices, and procedures to eliminate disparities in service delivery and outcomes for county residents.

In working to operationalize our new practice model, we experienced a series of fits and starts as urgent mission priorities kept eroding momentum. By 2020, we were navigating even more complexity and disruption. This included the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased isolation as families interacted less often with schools and other nodes in the traditional reporting network. The pandemic also prevented the child welfare workforce from making frequent, unrestricted contact with each other and the families they are serving. As a result, Fairfax County DFS has been managing resource and workforce challenges alongside a surge in referrals from schools. At the same time, we are tackling implementation of Family First. (These challenges and priorities may sound familiar!)

In the face of this complexity, we accepted that there is never a "right time" to take on systems-level change. We also realized we could not achieve the needed transformation on our own. Rather than repeating earlier tactics, we made a strategic decision to *succeed differently*. With a spirit of purpose and humility, we committed to innovative, authentic community and public-private partnerships. And as we have integrated partners into our workflows, we've been looking to them to help carry the weight of this transformational work.

Collaborative Change for Collective Impact

Multidisciplinary group decision making, group consultation, group supervision, and family involvement processes are all essential to increasing equity and improving outcomes. What's more, building and strengthening connections between home and community (including schools and culturally specific services) and nurturing relationships with caring, responsible adults provides protection for children and older youth beyond what we can offer through our child abuse and

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neglect reporting community. None of those are supports we could create or maintain independently.

With that in mind, we formed the Fairfax County Community Partner Advisory Group in 2020. This group brings together community stakeholders with diverse perspectives to co-create policies and customized community resources based on needs reflected in disaggregated data. It also provides opportunities for those who are part of the plan or receiving the services to be meaningfully involved in the development process.

The advisory group includes representatives from Fairfax County Public Schools, the Office of the County Attorney, the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board, the Fairfax CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) Program, Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services, SafeSpot (Fairfax's Children's Advocacy Center), and the foster care private provider community. We also invited the Virginia Department of Social Services—which is looking at Fairfax County's innovative approach to child welfare system redesign as a model for other counties across the commonwealth.

Fairfax County DFS also formed public-private partnerships with KVC Institute for Health Systems (proprietor of the Safe & Connected™ practice model), Accenture (expert in child welfare services, implementation, and change management), and the Butler Institute of the University of Denver (staff/partner training design



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and curriculum redevelopment). These three partnerships *move beyond* the traditional contractor–vendor relationship and serve as examples of generative thinking, planning, and co-creating to drive better outcomes.

From Ideas to Implementation

In 10 months—using existing Fairfax County DFS resources augmented by our partners—we have made significant progress in three key areas:

- **Human-centered design.** To gain a deeper understanding of strengths and needs, we conducted youth and parent focus groups. To understand service gaps, we engaged community stakeholders. We wanted them to tell us about our shortcomings and shortfalls, but we also wanted them to think about the art of the possible. What could the future be like? How could we knock down the silos and do better for the children of Fairfax?
- **Implementation assessment and road map.** Though confident that the Safe & Connected™ practice model was the best choice, we had encountered struggles in operationalizing it. Using implementation science, we identified where and why we had been stumbling. More important, we created a road map with clear implementation pillars for translating the model's tenets into clear roles, responsibilities, and tasks.
- **Professional training and development.** We conducted a learning needs assessment to understand the gaps in our workforce's knowledge and understanding of the model. We identified opportunities to close those gaps through formal and informal professional development. These efforts are helping us shift away from a hierarchical culture. Through a formal training curriculum and a coaching program, we're working to ensure that everyone—from front-line caseworkers to supervisors and managers—has knowledge of and confidence in our practice model.

Learn From Experience

More than ever, it's clear that we must reimagine our investments

Looking Ahead

Fairfax County DFS has organized future efforts into five strategic areas:

1. **Aligning** with DFS's Equity Statement and Equity Impact Plan;
2. **Fully implementing** the Safe & Connected™ model to identify racial disparities and other aspects of oppression and improve policies and practices of the child welfare service delivery system;
3. **Constructing** data development and analysis strategies (using quantitative and qualitative approaches) to better understand the extent and nature of racially disparate outcomes and inform system redesign;
4. **Conducting** training, workforce development, and capacity-building for all CYF staff members about how systemic oppression, bigotry, and violence impact the lives of children, families, and communities, as well as the institutions charged with supporting them; and
5. **Restructuring** existing partnerships and developing new ones to assist with and support disparity-reduction efforts through our continued community engagement efforts.

in children and families. If your organization is seeking to transform, consider replicating the work underway in Fairfax County. With a strategic road map grounded in implementation science, our approach can support your agency with a similar, program-wide initiative or a more agile approach that can be scaled across programs over time. Either way, we offer four preliminary recommendations based on our progress over the past 10 months.

1. **Ask for input from people you've served.** As we already mentioned, it can be quite humbling to listen to focus groups of people share their

experiences within the child welfare system. But until you acknowledge what hasn't worked in the past, you can't truly move forward on sustainable system-wide change.

2. **Get innovative with your budget.** Consider how you could use Title IV-E training funds to support curricula development and training to strengthen your workforce. Within our organization, some of these funds are being used to support the work with the Butler Institute for Families and KVC.
3. **Be prepared to invest more than money.** This type of work requires commitment from leadership to make it a department priority. You will need to put in a lot of "sweat equity" to co-create, drive, and implement your plans with partners. Within Fairfax DFS, we leaned on our external partners to keep up the momentum. Without their support, the challenge of staff resources and promotions would have been exponentially greater.
4. **Create impact that endures.** Consider how you will encourage lasting change. Our work in human-centered design made it clear that our middle managers and supervisors are critical to a successful transformation. We recognized a need to focus and invest in the mentoring, training, and coaching skills that managers and supervisors need to support front-line staff. We also are working with our partners to build in knowledge transfer activities to sustain efforts through every project phase.

Succeed Differently

The DFS bears responsibility for providing children and families of Fairfax with equitable, family-first services. The *entire community* shares responsibility for providing support and proactive care. Only through authentic partnerships can we co-create a future that both strengthens current practice and delivers equitable outcomes for families. Engaging with community partners and the private sector may be new to your organization. And it can be a vulnerable position. We assure you: It's worth it. 📍