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Needs Assessment Report: Current Issues at the Intersections of Domestic Violence, Child Welfare, and Child Custody Systems

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NATIONAL CENTER TO ADVANCE PEACE
for Children, Youth, and Families

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Contributors

The [National Center to Advance Peace for Children Youth, and Families \(NCAP\)](#) is a national resource center funded by the Family Violence Prevention and Services program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Our mission is to ensure that domestic violence cases involving children and youth are handled in a manner that recognizes the intersection of complex legal, cultural, and psychological dynamics of domestic violence. The NCAP was created in response to the reality that involvement in the child welfare and child custody systems can cause irreparable harm to survivors of domestic violence and their children, especially those who have historically been marginalized and lack equitable access to resources and supports. We advocate for a new approach, one led by the communities most impacted and prioritizing the voices of survivors. To achieve this vision, we work in partnership with various organizations and stakeholders to address inequities in these systems and promote transformative system changes that enhance responses to survivors of domestic violence at the intersections of child welfare and child custody systems.

The NCAP is a coalition of national culturally specific domestic violence organizations who engage the capacity of their own communities to solve their own problems. It is led by [Caminar Latino-Latinos United for Peace and Equity](#) and includes [Ujima: National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community](#), the [Alaska Native Women's Resource Center](#), and the [National Indigenous Women's Resource Center](#), as well as [Futures Without Violence](#). Together, we are committed to reimagining a system that supports and strengthens families impacted by domestic violence, thereby building a more just and equitable future for all children and families.

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Introduction

Decades of research have highlighted persistent challenges in how systems respond to families experiencing domestic violence. The siloing of domestic violence, child welfare, and child custody systems, despite clear and frequent intersections, has resulted in a lack of alignment, with conflicting responses that result in harm to survivors and their children (Meier & Sankaran, 2021). Within the child welfare system, survivors of domestic violence frequently experience punitive responses that place blame on the survivor while failing to hold the person who uses violence accountable (Humphreys et al., 2020; Kelton et al., 2020; DeSimone & Heward-Belle, 2020; Wingfield, 2018; Mabatah, 2016). Often, child welfare involvement further disadvantages survivors rather than providing the supports and assistance families need to achieve safety, stability, and well-being (Roberts, 2022; Johnson, 2021; Dunkerley, 2017). Similar challenges are observed in the child custody system, where lack of education, understanding, and resources prevent professionals from making informed decisions that increase safety for survivors of domestic violence and their children (Meier & Sankaran, 2021; Gutowski & Goodman, 2020; Stark, 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated many of the pre-existing challenges within these systems, while also presenting both new challenges and new opportunities for innovation. While the immediate crisis of the pandemic has passed, there is considerable insight to be gained in examining its impact and what has changed in the intervening years. This report presents the findings of a recent survey, which was conducted to understand the current needs of professionals working at the intersections of domestic violence, child welfare, and child custody. We aimed to identify the ongoing training and resources necessary for professionals who work with families experiencing domestic violence and co-occurring involvement with child welfare or custody systems. The survey also explored how services and interventions evolved during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, documenting the challenges, innovations, and lasting lessons learned. We conclude by highlighting key policy and practice implications. Insights gained through the analysis will be used to develop new resources and inform national conversations, ensuring our support for the field reflects current needs.

Methods

To gather perspectives from those in the field working at the intersections of domestic violence, child welfare, and child custody, a brief survey instrument was developed. Questions included in the survey solicited input on how responses to families at this intersection could be improved, what are current training and technical assistance needs to improve organizational and systems responses at this intersection, how were families and services impacted by the pandemic (including ongoing impacts), and any innovations or lessons learned that came out of the pandemic. In addition, respondents were asked to share their role or position title, which state or territory they reside in, what type of agency they work for (e.g., state or local government, tribal government, nonprofit), and which field they work in (domestic violence, child welfare, or child custody).

Separate sets of questions were developed for three target groups of respondents: (1) domestic violence advocates and service providers, (2) child welfare agencies, and (3) representatives from the child custody system (e.g., attorneys, family court judges). This allowed the questions to be tailored to the different fields of the respondents. The target audience for the survey was individuals serving in a leadership role who could provide responses representative of their agency. Respondents were further encouraged to consult with others at their organization as needed to answer the questions. Please see Appendix A for a copy of the survey questions.

The survey was administered using *QuestionPro*, a web-based survey platform. A contact list of potential respondents was created using a combination of publicly available email addresses (e.g., those found on agencies' websites) and NCAP's listserv. Additionally, we reached out to organizational partners and other external connections to solicit their assistance in sharing the survey with their networks. Through this multi-pronged approach, the survey went out to over 1,000 potential respondents. Individuals received an email explaining the purpose of the study with an anonymous survey link. A three-wave mailing strategy was used to maximize recruitment, with two weekly follow-up email reminders sent after the initial administration.

Survey questions were predominantly open-response format, thus generating mostly qualitative data for analysis. Responses were analyzed by question using open coding to identify themes and concepts that emerged from the data. Four team members engaged in this coding process, with each responsible for a different set of questions. A fifth team

member then reviewed all the codes across the questions to identify overarching themes and produce an overall analysis of the findings.

Results

Findings presented here are organized into three sections. First, we provide a brief description of the respondents who completed the survey. Next, we describe findings from respondents who identified themselves as working for domestic violence services organizations, followed by findings from respondents who identified as working in the child welfare system. While the survey did not yield any findings specifically from individuals who identified as working in the child custody system, respondents did share their perspectives about the intersections of their work with the custody system.

Respondents

The survey was opened by 82 individuals who received the survey link. Of these, 63 started the survey, 33 of whom (52%) completed enough of the survey to be included in the analysis (meaning they answered more than just the preliminary background and demographic questions). Respondents were fairly evenly split between child welfare (n = 15) and domestic violence (n = 18) fields. There were no respondents who identified as being from the child custody system.

Respondents were fairly well distributed across the United States, covering considerable portions of the West, Southwest, East Coast, and some of the Midwest. The central and southern states were less represented (see Figure 1). Respondents most frequently reported they worked for a nonprofit organization (n = 13) or Tribal government (n = 13), followed by State or local government agencies (n = 4), and culturally-specific organizations (n = 3) (see Figure 2). A range of organizational roles were represented, including executive leadership (e.g., director, administrator, CEO) (n = 12), management (n = 2), coordinator (n = 6), social worker or caseworker (n = 9), and advocate (n = 4).

Figure 1. States Where Respondents Work

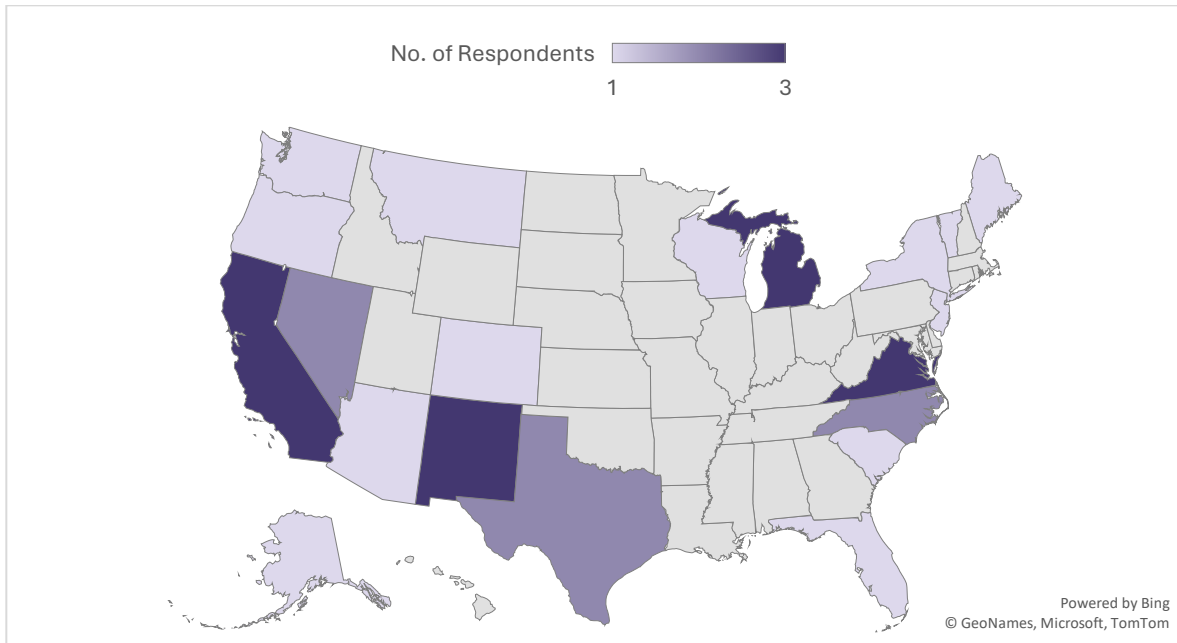
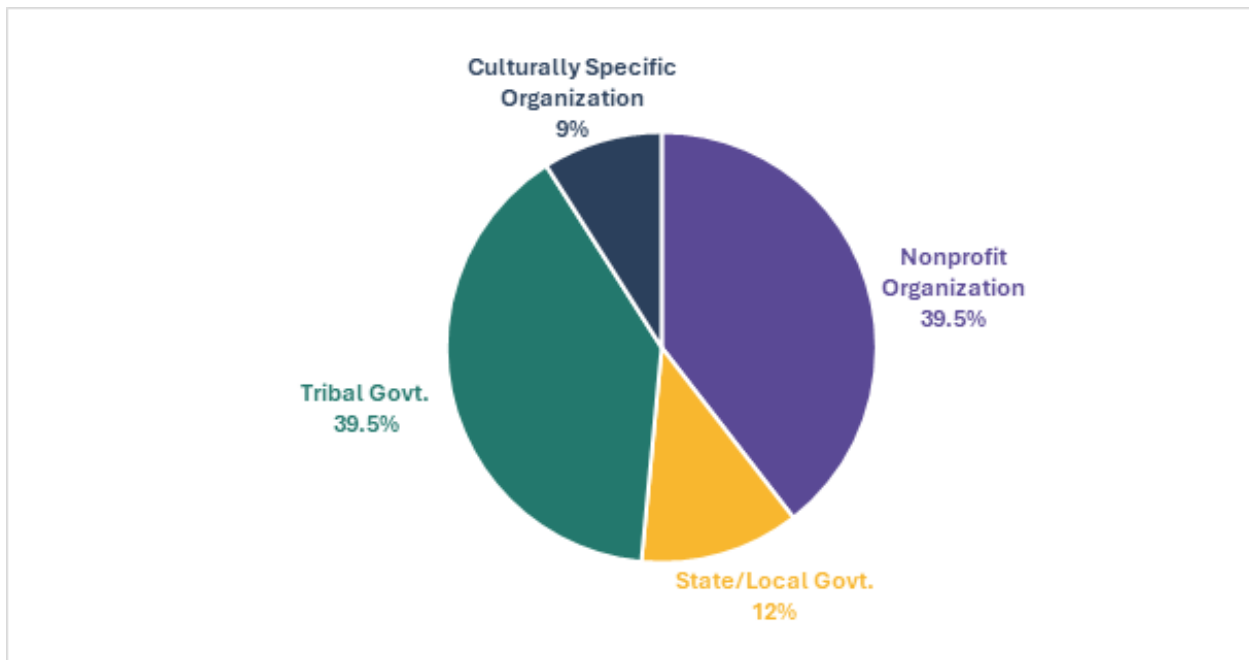


Figure 2. Type of Agency or Organization Where Respondents Work



Domestic Violence Provider Results

The needs assessment revealed several key themes in how domestic violence service providers, advocates, and organizations perceive major issues at the intersection of domestic violence, child custody, and child welfare and how system responses were impacted by the pandemic.

Systems Change and Integration

Respondents emphasized the need for greater integration between domestic violence, child welfare, and child custody systems. A strong call emerged for cross-training, formal roles for domestic violence advocates within child welfare, and improved recognition of the dynamics of coercive control and post-separation abuse. Participants reported frustration that courts and agencies often fail to “connect the dots” in custody decisions, leaving survivors and children vulnerable. Legislative reform, institutional standards, and the inclusion of survivor voices to inform both practice and policy were identified as critical.

Training and Capacity Building

There was widespread recognition that training deficits undermine system responses. Judges, attorneys, evaluators, guardians ad litem (GALs), law enforcement, child protective services (CPS) staff, and first responders were consistently identified as needing expanded education on domestic violence dynamics. Respondents called for training to counter harmful narratives, such as parental alienation, and to increase trauma-informed practice across agencies. Advocates themselves also expressed the need for stronger orientation to the child welfare and custody systems, including procedural knowledge and best practices in documentation.

Access to Resources and Supports

Participants described profound gaps in accessible legal aid, supervised visitation centers, housing, financial assistance, and transportation supports. Many called for more survivor-centered, culturally responsive, and long-term approaches, extending beyond immediate safety to address broader stability. Specific needs for immigrant families and communities of color were highlighted, with respondents noting disproportionate impacts on Black and Indigenous families, as well as the importance of language access.

Pandemic Impacts

COVID-19 created multiple layers of disruption. Service providers reported loss of safe spaces, barriers to remote engagement, increased isolation and violence, economic instability, and heightened stress among both families and staff. Court delays and transitions to virtual hearings created backlogs and inequities, sometimes leading to custody losses for survivors. Advocates described struggling with technology barriers, burnout, and blurred work-home boundaries. At the same time, some organizations developed innovative adaptations, including hybrid service models, expanded online trainings, flexible emergency assistance, and strengthened cross-system collaborations.

Lessons Learned

Providers highlighted the importance of choice, flexibility, and survivor-centered responses as lasting takeaways from the pandemic. Expanded use of hybrid and virtual options, stronger cross-system communication, and attention to cultural responsiveness were seen as long-term improvements. Respondents stressed the need to include domestic violence service providers in emergency planning, prioritize both survivor and staff safety, and continue building coordinated community responses. Overall, the results demonstrate that domestic violence service providers see systemic reform, survivor-centered support, cultural responsiveness, and long-term resource investment as essential for improving outcomes at the intersection of domestic violence, custody, and child welfare.

Child Welfare Provider Results

Responses from child welfare system agencies captured perspectives from leadership and staff on how the system currently responds to domestic violence as well as the improvements needed in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Systemic Shifts and Cultural Change

Respondents identified the need for a fundamental culture shift within the child welfare system, moving away from punitive approaches toward trauma-informed, survivor-centered, and family-preservation practices. Participants called for recognition that survivors of domestic violence should not be treated as offenders and stressed the importance of understanding how abuse can persist even after physical separation. Many respondents highlighted systemic inequities, including embedded racism and cultural bias, which exacerbate harm for marginalized communities.

Training and Workforce Development

Strong calls were made for trauma-informed and culturally affirming training, with an emphasis on increasing empathy, reducing victim-blaming, and adopting evidence-based behavioral interventions such as motivational interviewing. Respondents identified the need for more therapists, on-site clinical support, culturally relevant family therapy, and Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) compliance training. There was consensus on the value of multi-disciplinary, cross-system training and the co-location of domestic violence advocates within child welfare agencies.

Resources and Supports for Families

Participants described significant resource gaps, including emergency housing, supervised visitation services, flexible funds for mothers and children, and access to culturally specific supports. Respondents stressed the importance of prevention and early intervention to disrupt cycles of generational trauma and violence. Rural and tribal communities were described as facing compounded barriers, including limited technology and transportation.

Pandemic Impacts

The pandemic disrupted the child welfare system at nearly every level. Respondents reported service interruptions, barriers to engagement, foster family recruitment challenges, court delays, and staff shortages. Families experienced increased isolation, heightened substance use, worsening mental health, financial instability, and reduced oversight due to the absence of mandated reporters. Domestic violence rates also rose, further straining family safety. Workforce stress was acute, with burnout, illness, and administrative burdens leading to long-term provider losses.

Innovations and Adaptations

Despite the strain, the pandemic spurred some innovations. Virtual services, multi-modal communication (phone, text, social media), emergency distribution of food and cash, and stronger collaborations with health, housing, and domestic violence agencies were developed. Some of these practices, especially hybrid service delivery and virtual check-ins, have been sustained, though unevenly across communities.

Lessons Learned

Respondents reflected that the pandemic underscored the need for flexibility, accountability, collaboration, and trauma-informed service delivery. They highlighted the resilience of families and the importance of centering strengths in case practice. Long-term changes include sustaining hybrid service models, leveraging technology to reduce access barriers, and building stronger partnerships with community-based agencies. At the same time, respondents cautioned that many communities are still recovering, and systemic inequities remain entrenched. Overall, the results suggest that child welfare stakeholders see the future of the system hinging on sustained cultural change, investment in trauma-informed and culturally responsive training, expansion of family-centered resources, and cross-system collaboration that resists punitive orientations and centers family stability.

Discussion

Across both domestic violence and child welfare providers, respondents consistently underscored the disruptive force of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic amplified pre-existing systemic gaps, producing heightened risks for survivors and families while simultaneously straining organizational capacity. Both domestic violence service providers and child welfare professionals identified urgent needs for trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and survivor-centered approaches. They emphasized that punitive orientations in custody and child welfare responses exacerbate harm, particularly when survivor-parents are treated as culpable for the violence they endure.

Another area of convergence was the demand for enhanced training and workforce development. Respondents from both assessments called for education of judges, attorneys, guardians ad litem, evaluators, child protection staff, law enforcement, and first responders. There was broad recognition that gaps in professional knowledge perpetuate misinterpretations of domestic violence dynamics, parental alienation narratives, and victim-blaming practices. Cross-system training, co-located domestic violence advocates within the child welfare system, and survivor-informed curricula were proposed as strategies to reduce these gaps.

The pandemic also exposed vulnerabilities in resource access. Both domestic violence and child welfare system stakeholders described gaps in affordable legal aid, housing, supervised visitation, transportation, and mental health support. The loss of safe spaces and diminished oversight by mandated reporters during lockdowns intensified family risks. At the same time, service disruptions highlighted the critical role of emergency housing, flexible financial assistance, and virtual or hybrid engagement models. While technology facilitated continuity in some cases, inequities in access often deepened exclusion, especially for rural, low-income, and immigrant families.

Domestic violence providers highlighted the unique intersection of child custody and survivor safety during the pandemic. Court delays, virtual hearings, and inconsistent judicial recognition of domestic violence created backlogs and at times resulted in custody losses for survivors. Respondents stressed the scarcity of legal aid tailored to custody disputes and noted how abusers manipulated pandemic-related disruptions to delay custody exchanges or undermine survivor credibility. The rise of harmful parental alienation narratives, whereby survivors of domestic violence are accused of manipulating and alienating children against the other parent, further compounded these challenges. Providers also emphasized the need for specialized visitation centers and wraparound supports that extend beyond crisis intervention to address long-term stability.

Child welfare stakeholders, on the other hand, described challenges rooted in systemic structures, including foster home shortages, disrupted recruitment of kinship caregivers, and compliance with ICWA. Respondents emphasized the need for cultural humility and strengthening tribal sovereignty in child welfare decision-making. Workforce stress, staff attrition, and difficulties with home visits or in-person assessments further compromised system capacity. While domestic violence service providers focused heavily on custody-specific reforms, child welfare system respondents called for broader structural reforms to address inequities, invest in prevention, and strengthen service delivery in rural and tribal contexts.

Interpretation and Implications for Policy and Practice

Taken together, the findings suggest that both domestic violence and child welfare systems must move toward integrated, survivor-centered, and culturally responsive approaches that extend beyond crisis management. The pandemic reinforced the importance of flexibility, hybrid service models, and collaboration across systems. Yet it also revealed entrenched inequities that disproportionately harm marginalized families,

underscoring the urgency of policy reforms, sustainable funding, and inclusion of survivor and community voices.

For domestic violence services, reforms must prioritize access to legal advocacy, supervised visitation, and systemic accountability in custody cases. For child welfare systems, strengthening ICWA compliance, investing in workforce development, and supporting long-term prevention are central. Both systems require trauma-informed and culturally affirming training to reduce punitive practices and rebuild trust with families.

Ultimately, the pandemic experience underscored the resilience of survivors, families, and service providers. It also exposed system fragility, reminding stakeholders that domestic violence services and child welfare functions are essential components of public safety and community well-being. Moving forward, a coordinated response that bridges domestic violence and child welfare systems, resists punitive orientations, and builds sustainable infrastructures of care will be critical to safeguarding children and survivors during times of crisis and beyond.

The combined insights from domestic violence and child welfare system respondents hold significant implications for policy and practice. First, both systems must prioritize legislative and institutional reforms that embed trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches into daily operations. This includes resisting punitive frameworks, strengthening judicial and child welfare decision-making, and ensuring that policies explicitly protect the rights and safety of survivors and children. Second, equitable access to resources, such as legal advocacy, supervised visitation, housing, transportation, and flexible financial support, should be treated as fundamental components of system responses rather than ancillary services. These investments are particularly urgent for marginalized populations, including Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and rural families, who experienced disproportionate harms during the pandemic.

Third, cross-system collaboration must be institutionalized. Embedding domestic violence advocates within child welfare structures, creating sustainable multidisciplinary training pipelines, and formalizing communication mechanisms across courts, agencies, and community partners are essential to building resilience and accountability. Such measures will reduce siloing and enhance coordinated care for families navigating both systems. Finally, policy makers and administrators should treat workforce sustainability as a policy priority. The pandemic underscored how burnout, staff turnover, and inadequate supports compromise system capacity. Investments in training, supervision,

and secondary trauma supports are necessary to retain skilled staff and ensure continuity of care.

In sum, the findings call for systemic reforms that are survivor-centered, culturally grounded, and oriented toward long-term family stability. These implications highlight the need for both immediate action and sustained commitment to reshaping domestic violence, child welfare, and child custody system responses in ways that promote safety, dignity, and equity.

Conclusion

Findings from the needs assessments underscore that the COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted existing services but also magnified structural inequities and systemic shortcomings. Yet, these disruptions also catalyzed innovations, including hybrid service delivery, stronger cross-system collaborations, and greater recognition of survivor and family voices in shaping responses. The conclusion drawn from this assessment is clear: meaningful reform requires a sustained commitment to trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and survivor-centered practices across domestic violence, child welfare, and child custody systems. Policymakers, administrators, and practitioners must prioritize equitable access to legal aid, housing, and supportive resources while reducing punitive approaches that undermine family stability. Long-term investments in workforce development, cross-training, and accountability are equally essential.

Future efforts must build upon the lessons of the pandemic by embedding flexibility, collaboration, and resilience into systemic responses. By centering survivors, children, and families in policy and practice, domestic violence, child welfare, and child custody systems can move beyond crisis-oriented models and toward structures that ensure safety, dignity, and well-being in both ordinary times and future emergencies.

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Appendix A

Needs Assessment Survey

Intro Questions

1. What is your position/role within your organization?
2. Which state/territory are you located in? [Provide dropdown list]
3. Which of the following best describes your role/work:
 - a. Child welfare/ child protection system
 - b. Domestic violence services or advocacy
 - c. Child custody system

Questions for CWS stakeholders:

1. What do you think needs to change (if anything) about how the child welfare system responds to domestic violence? What changes or improvements do you believe the system could make to better support survivors of domestic violence and their children?
2. What training or resources are needed at this time to support your system's ability to respond effectively to vulnerable children and families?
3. At the onset of the pandemic, what were the primary challenges you experienced with regard to the overall operation of your child welfare system?
4. Did your child welfare system switch to any forms of remote or virtual work or service provision during the pandemic? Please indicate all that apply:
 - Intake/Screening
 - CPS Investigations
 - Case Management
 - Dependency Court
 - Parent-child visitation

- Services – mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, parenting classes, etc.
 - Other – please specify: _____
 - No virtual or remote services were implemented
5. How do you feel the switch to virtual/remote work impacted child welfare services?
 6. What other impacts did the pandemic have on your child welfare system? (e.g., impact on out-of-home placements and ability to recruit foster homes, provision of in-home or prevention services, reunifications or timelines for achieving permanency)
 7. How did the pandemic impact families involved with or at-risk of involvement with the child welfare system? For example, did you observe any changes in family risk factors related to the pandemic? (e.g., changes in substance use, economic security, domestic violence?)
 8. What solutions or innovations were developed in response to the pandemic? Which, if any, of these have been sustained?
 9. What are the major lessons learned from the pandemic? How have you used this experience and the lessons learned from it to make any long-term changes to your child welfare system?
 10. Please use this opportunity to share anything else related to the topics of child welfare and domestic violence that you would like us to know or consider.

Questions for DV providers/advocates:

1. In your opinion, what can domestic violence advocates, shelters, and related service providers do better to support survivors of domestic violence who are involved in child custody proceedings or the child welfare system? What needs to change about the response to domestic violence when there may be intersecting child welfare or custody issues?
2. What training or resources are needed at this time to improve system responses to families at the intersection of domestic violence, child welfare, and child custody issues?

3. At the onset of the pandemic, what were the primary challenges you experienced with regard to your work with survivors and families impacted by domestic violence?
4. Did your organization switch to any forms of remote or virtual work or service provision during the pandemic? How do you feel services were impacted by remote/virtual work?
5. From your observations, how did the pandemic impact the safety and well-being of survivors of domestic violence and their children?
6. What (if any) impact did the pandemic have on involvement with the child welfare system among families experiencing domestic violence? How did it impact your interactions, coordination, or collaboration with the child welfare system?
7. What (if any) impact did the pandemic have on child custody proceedings for families impacted by domestic violence? How did it impact your interactions, coordination, or collaboration with the child custody system?
8. What solutions or innovations were developed in response to the pandemic (at your organization or in your community) to support families experiencing domestic violence? Which, if any, of these have been sustained?
9. What are the major lessons learned from the pandemic? How have you used this experience and the lessons learned from it to make any long-term changes to your organization?
10. Please use this opportunity to share anything else related to the topics of child welfare, child custody, and domestic violence that you would like us to know or consider.

Questions for Child Custody System stakeholders:

1. What do you think needs to change about how the family court system responds to domestic violence? How could the system better support survivors of domestic violence and their children?

2. What training or resources are needed at this time to support the family court system's ability to respond effectively to families experiencing domestic violence?
3. At the onset of the pandemic, what were the primary challenges you experienced with regard to child custody proceedings?
4. Did the family court system in your community switch to or offer remote/virtual court hearings for child custody proceedings in response to the pandemic? How do you feel this impacted custody proceedings?
5. What (if any) impact did the pandemic have on child custody arrangements and/or proceedings for families experiencing domestic violence? What were the primary concerns or challenges for these families?
6. In your experience, did pandemic-related custody issues increase system involvement (e.g., CPS reports, court filings, law enforcement calls, referrals to child support)? Please describe.
7. What solutions or innovations were developed within the family court system in response to the pandemic? Which, if any, of these have been sustained?
8. What strategies or supports did your organization (or partner organizations) use to help survivors navigate custody exchanges or visitation orders during periods of quarantine or limited court access?
9. What are the major lessons learned from the pandemic? How have this experience and the lessons learned from it been used to make long-term changes to the child custody system?
10. Please use this opportunity to share anything else related to the topics of child welfare, child custody, and domestic violence that you would like us to know or consider.