

Introduction

Our team at Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research (TIER) has been partnering with Parents as Teachers National Center (PATNC) on a multi-year project to understand how Parents as Teachers (PAT) affiliates support families who are involved with child welfare services and inform program improvements.

A critical aspect of this work has been to learn from PAT participants with firsthand experience navigating child protective services (CPS) when their children have been removed from the home, referred to as “custody disruptions,” to understand the challenges they encounter and the types of supports they value during this time. In 2022 and 2023, we held interviews and focus groups with PAT participants to hear about their experiences with CPS and PAT through custody disruptions. PAT participants walked us through how they first became involved with CPS, their experiences with the agency, and where they were presently in the process. We also asked them to describe how they initially connected with PAT and the support they received through their open CPS cases. The *Journey Map* presented here visually summarizes these PAT participants’ experiences through the CPS system.¹

Methodology

Our team held interviews and focus groups with 26 PAT participants, referred to in this brief as “participants,” who had experienced custody disruptions. Participants were recruited from 4 PAT programs across 4 states (see Table 1 for participant characteristics). Each program was actively supporting participants experiencing custody disruptions and had

a demonstrated interest in improving services for these families. We collected data in person, unless a virtual meeting was specifically requested.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Frequency/ M (range)
State (<i>n</i> = 26)	
Hawaii	23%
Massachusetts	4%
Nevada	31%
Texas	42%
Gender (<i>n</i> = 26)	
Female	81%
Male	19%
Race/ethnicity (<i>n</i> = 23)	
Black	4%
Hispanic	17%
Native Hawaiian	4%
White	43%
Multi-racial	30%
# of children (<i>n</i> = 26)	3 (1–6)
# of children in custody (<i>n</i> = 26)	1 (0–4)
Relationship status (<i>n</i> = 26)	
In a relationship	48%
Single/divorced/separated	52%

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed in NVivo R1. In addition, each individual participant journey was visually mapped out using Miro, a digital collaboration tool, to view participant trajectories side-by-side and identify commonalities at different points in the journey.

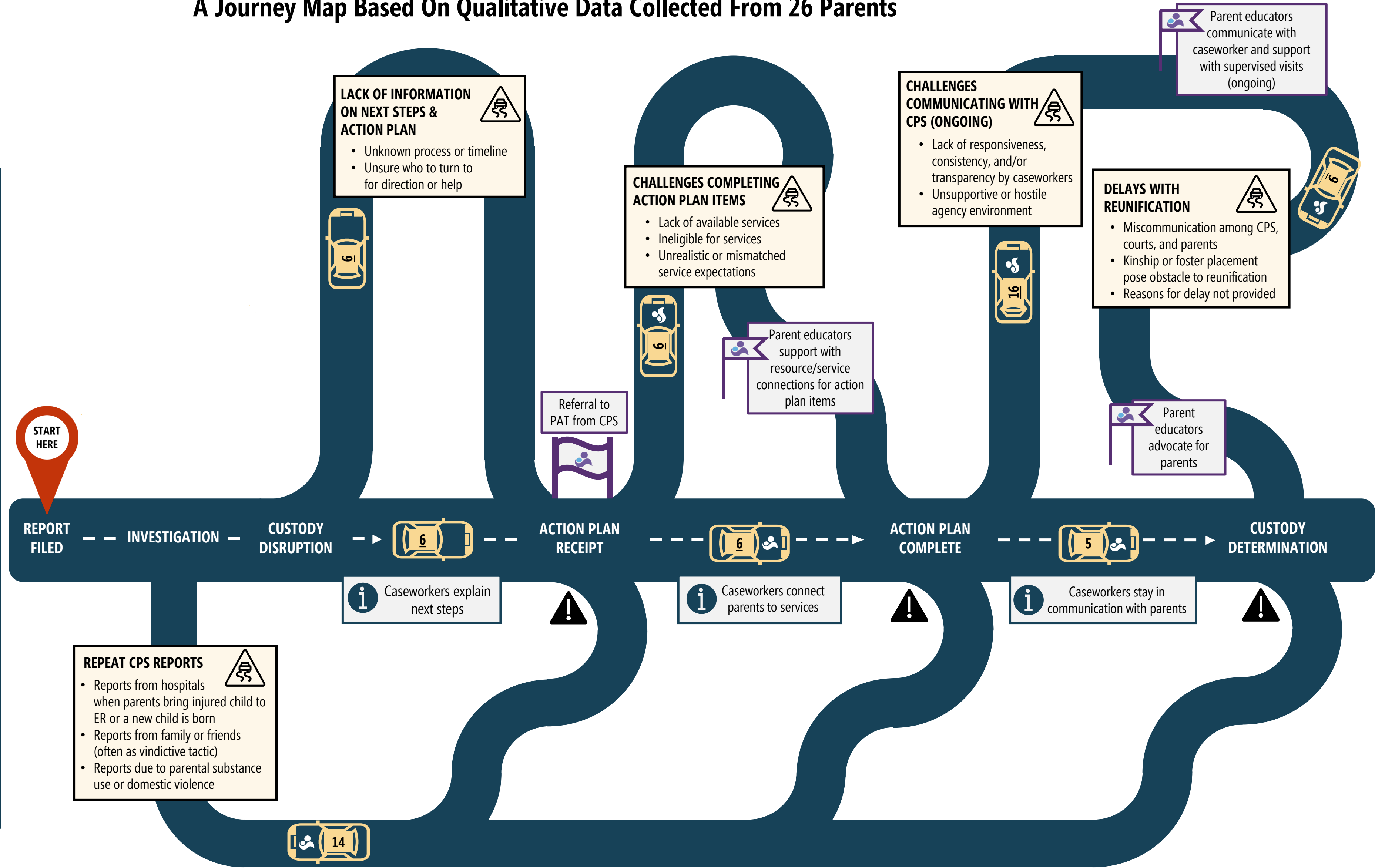
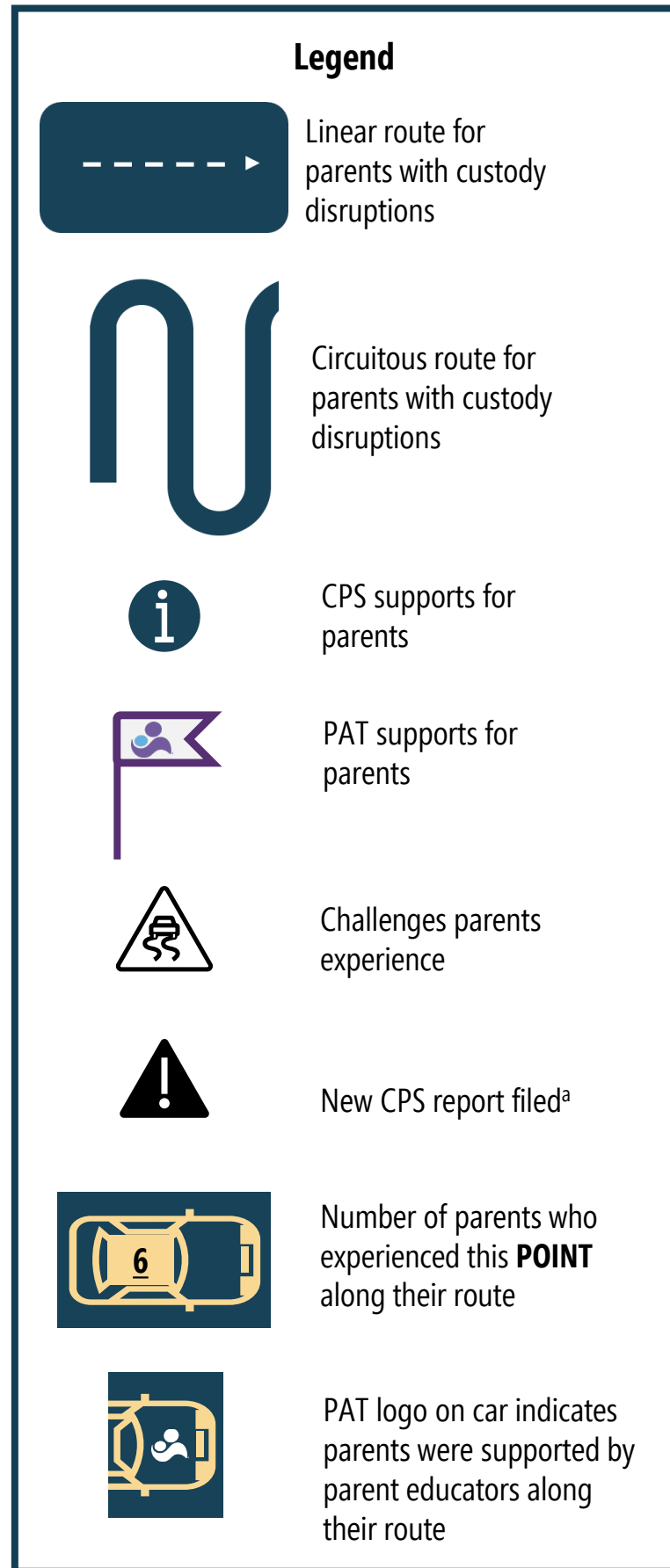
The Journey Map

The graphic of the *Journey Map* is on the next page, followed by a description of each of the map components.

¹We aimed to center the parent experience in this research and thus did not fact check stories with other sources, such as parent educators or CPS caseworkers.

A Snapshot of PAT Participant Experiences Navigating Custody Disruptions

A Journey Map Based On Qualitative Data Collected From 26 Parents



Note. ^a PAT families reported repeat CPS reports along all **POINTS** of the journey.

Overview of Map Components

The main components of the *Journey Map* are routes with signposts (the boxed text) and cars. The routes signify different pathways participants travelled as they moved through the system, crossing each other to demonstrate that participants often experience a mix of these scenarios. The capitalized bolded text signify CPS milestones that all participants experiencing custody disruptions eventually encounter. The signposts along these routes represent key junctures—obstacles and supports—and the cars represent the participants, what they bring with them on their journey, and the work they are doing to regain custody. The numbers on the tops of the cars indicate how many participants from our sample reported experiencing the adjacent obstacle or support along their individual journey. Below, we describe each of these components in greater detail.

Routes

There are two types of routes on the map: a straight central road representing a “linear route,” which is a simplified version of the CPS process following custody disruption as drawn from policy scans; and a curvy road representing the more “circuitous route” through the process. Most participants described experiencing a mix of these routes—with some parts of the journey smoother than others.

Both routes start with a filed report. Participants described being reported to CPS by family and friends, schools, hospitals, or other community programs. Reasons for reports included domestic violence, substance use, neglect, environmental danger, or the child being born in a jail or prison. Many participants also shared incidents of being spuriously reported by people they knew—usually as a vindictive or vengeful tactic in response to interpersonal conflict. While some participants felt the reason behind their custody disruption was valid, others felt that systems worked

against them and led them to the situations they currently were in.

The two routes on the map intersect at key milestones that all participants eventually encounter as they work towards reaching a custody determination. Very few of the participants we spoke with had reached a custody determination at the time of data collection.



Linear Route

The linear route on the map includes high-level supports (represented by the signposts with information symbols) that CPS caseworkers are expected to provide participants as they navigate custody disruptions. These include clear explanations of next steps to the participant after the custody disruption occurs so they understand the process and timeline for reunification; connecting participants to the services outlined on the action plan and supporting them through any challenges accessing services; and ensuring that participants are kept updated on the status of their case once the action plan has been completed and they are awaiting a custody determination. While experiencing a custody disruption is never a positive experience, the linear route depicts the best-case scenario where participants are provided adequate support to progress with their case in a timely manner; staying on this route is predicated on receiving consistent and ongoing support from CPS caseworkers.



Circuitous Route

In contrast to the linear route, the circuitous route represents a bumpy and elongated journey, including obstacles (represented by the signposts with road hazard symbols) that participants described facing when they did not receive adequate support from their CPS caseworker, and supports (represented by the signposts with PAT flags) that participants described receiving from their parent educator. The circuitous route depicts a worse-case scenario for participants, where they receive little,

if any, support from their caseworker. We describe the obstacles and supports along the circuitous route in more detail below.



Obstacle Signposts

Each twist or turn represents specific obstacles that participants faced along the journey.

Lack of information on next steps. Almost all participants reported significant gaps in time (1–2 months) between child removal and hearing from their CPS caseworker about next steps, even when they independently reached out to the CPS agency for help. In the absence of communication from CPS, several participants turned to other community providers for guidance or next steps and independently enrolled in services that they felt may be relevant to their case. Many participants never received a copy of their action plan, or felt like what they did receive from their CPS caseworker was unclear or vague, leaving them unsure about the process or timeline. Amidst this confusion, participants also described the impact of having a child removed on their mental and behavioral health; participants experienced deep anxiety and depression, and some participants described relapsing or even starting up with substance use after their child was removed from the home.



I've known people that have gone through CPS before, so I know some kind of parenting class was going to be necessary. But it was taking so long for the initial stuff to get started, after they removed the kids, that I got real anxious. So, I just talked to a lawyer and I did a parenting class by myself online.



Challenges completing action plan items. After receiving some information on their action plan, participants described being inundated with services and “jumping through hoops” to meet CPS expectations. Some participants described action plans

with impossible expectations—for example, services or supervised visits that were located far away, services that were full or had long waitlists, and even services that they would try to access and be told they did not qualify for. We also heard frustration around participants being required to enroll in a “cookie cutter” set of services or programs that felt repetitive and sometimes irrelevant to their specific situation. Some participants felt silenced by CPS when trying to raise these challenges and learned to stay quiet over time, even if they felt strongly that an expectation was unreasonable.



I went through nine months of hoops before CPS would give him back... They put all three kids in foster care down in [city]. I was travelling 315 miles one way to have in-person visits.



Repeat CPS reports. Some participants were stuck in a cycle of one case closing and another opening soon after, while others had repeat reports filed on them throughout the trajectory of their open case. These repeat reports, which happened at multiple points along participants' journeys, are represented by the paths leading downwards to the road going back toward the investigation milestone. Some participants had been involved with CPS for so long—from childhood onwards—that they simply believed that CPS would always be part of their life. Many participants described the stress of being under a constant state of surveillance as if any slip-up in their every day life would be pounced on by the system.



I've had cases once a year every year. I've been dealing with CPS for like, I don't know, 15 years, or something like that. I mean y'all can do the math. The last three years I've had removals; before that, my cases have always been closed... I have a narcissistic mother and she would call on me.



Challenges communicating with CPS. Communication challenges with CPS caseworkers—and sometimes with others involved with their case (e.g., lawyers, treatment providers)—were ongoing for participants, and prompted most of the other obstacles signposted on the map. Communication challenges sometimes resulted from a change in CPS caseworker, when vital information about the case was not passed on. Participants frequently mentioned facing this obstacle once they had completed the items on their action plan; many described feeling like they were stuck in limbo at this point, with little to no communication with their CPS caseworker and a perceived lack of transparency around what was happening in their case. The limited communication participants did have with their CPS caseworker felt contentious and judgmental, and in some cases, they requested a new caseworker. Participants also described not wanting to go into CPS offices for their supervised visits due to the feelings of hostility they experienced there. Some participants—particularly those who had previously struggled with substance use—felt that CPS staff continued to hold their past against them, even if they were succeeding at making positive changes in their life.



She [CPS caseworker] never made time for us. Like, she's always busy. And I'm like, 'Okay, but you wanted me to do this, so I'm calling...' And she would always reschedule, reschedule, reschedule.



Delays with reunification. Several participants were close to reaching a custody determination. They had completed their action plan, were having unsupervised visits with their child, attending court dates, and were anxiously awaiting notice of reunification. Participants described past experiences when they had gone through each of these steps and were under the impression that they were about to reunify, when an unknown issue arose that derailed reunification, and in

some cases, led to permanent custody loss. Therefore, this waiting period at the end of the case was very challenging because participants were unsure of what was going on behind the scenes and whether they were actually going to regain custody. There was a general perception among participants that decisions around custody determination were arbitrary and unpredictable, even if a participant did what was asked of them.



Everything was taken care of a long time ago... Just waiting [for the children] to come home. That's all we're waiting for... We're inches away.



PAT Support Signposts

The signposts with the PAT flags represent the supports parent educators provided participants along the circuitous route. These are placed near the obstacles to demonstrate ways that parent educators stepped in to ameliorate challenges participants were facing with their CPS case.

Parent educators support with resource/service connections for action plan items. Parent educators helped participants connect to services on their action plan—including counseling or therapy, substance use treatment, legal services, and shelters.

Parent educators communicate with caseworkers and support with supervised visits. Most participants signed forms for their parent educator to communicate directly with CPS; they wanted parent educators involved in the case so that home visit content could be tailored accordingly. Participants also described support from parent educators during supervised visits—at some programs, parent educators attended visits with participants or even served as “supervisor” of the visit. In programs where parent educators were not allowed by CPS to participate in supervised visits in any capacity, participants described how their parent educator helped prepare or “coach” them for visits.

Parent educators advocate for parents. Participants described how parent educators would speak up for them when they were in vulnerable situations with CPS. They also shared how their parent educator advocated for them with the legal system by writing letters to describe the progress participants have made, offering to be subpoenaed, and testifying in court in support of the participant.



The closeout where we had everybody on Zoom. [Other programs], they didn't speak up. My counselor didn't speak up. My PAT advocate said: 'I just want to acknowledge the parent right now.' I was like... You are family.



Cars

The cars represent the participants we spoke with, what they bring with them on their journey, and the work they are doing to regain custody. Participants faced a range of challenges prior to involvement with CPS, including involvement with CPS as a child, unreliable support systems, abusive relationships, substance use, and poverty. When viewing the cars on this map—particularly those on the circuitous route—keep in mind that they are going through these twists and turns with past trauma and a multitude of competing stressors.



Numbers on Cars

The number on the roof of each car represents how many participants described experiencing the obstacle or support that the car is adjacent to. For example, 5 participants along the linear route reported that their caseworker stayed in communication with them, and 14 participants along the circuitous route had a repeat CPS report.



Cars with the PAT Logo

Participants generally became involved with PAT because participating in the program was

a requirement on the action plan. Therefore, after the action plan receipt milestone, cars on the routes have a PAT logo, indicating that participants are engaging in the home visiting program from that point forward. When we asked participants about the support PAT provides them via home visits, they described several different types of support related to parenting. While these supports are not included on the map, each is described below to highlight the work participants are personally engaging in along the journey.

The parenting curriculum. Participants valued PAT's focus on positive parenting, often referencing their own childhood and wanting to approach parenting in a different way than what they experienced as a child. They described learning better approaches to discipline, managing their own emotions, communication, and connecting and bonding with their child. Participants felt that this knowledge prepared them for reunification.



I need to learn what is positive parenting, discipline, and structure... The things that we learned as kids...didn't really work for us, right? I'm trying to do something different here.



Individualized, flexible, & hands-on approach.

Participants shared how parent educators worked with them one-on-one when the child was not present through "parent-only visits," and how they were able to apply the skills they learned during visits with their child. They felt they were provided tailored content based on their individual needs and interests. Participants appreciated the flexibility of parent educators in working around their schedule, particularly when they were concurrently working through the action plan. They contrasted PAT's model and approach to other more "lecture-style" programs, finding that PAT's hands-on activities served as tangible ways to learn and connect with their child.

PAT as a resource. For participants who did not have friends or family to lean on, parent educators served as a person to call or text when parenting questions arose. For participants who still had a child in the home, parent educators connected them to free resources including carriers, diapers, and food, and facilitated service connections to different early learning programs.

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I have all these kids. I can call my mom...but she's not stable. My dad's not stable. But if I have a problem, I could message [my parent educator] and she responds right away.

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Acknowledgment and validation. Participants described how their parent educators acknowledged them as individuals with the potential to thrive and be a good parent. They shared how important it was to have someone who validated them through custody disruptions, when they were constantly reminded of their mistakes and missteps as a parent. Many participants described their parent educator as family or a close friend, and shared how they served as a source of comfort and support for them through an unimaginably difficult time.

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She helped me with a different way of thinking... Pretty much everybody in my life thinks that I'm nothing but a failure. And I'm not going to amount to anything. That I'm not a good mother. I'm not a good person... I feel invisible. But when I'm near [parent educator] ... I feel wanted. I feel welcomed. Like, I feel like I exist... It's such a huge difference than just my everyday life ... Like when you walk in the door [to PAT program], you just feel like people know you exist. People know you're here. People want to talk to you. People want to see you.

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Conclusion

This *Journey Map* offers insight into the experiences of participants with custody disruptions—where they get stuck and the types of support that they value along the way. Findings from this study highlight the complex and grueling journey that some participants who experience custody disruptions must travel as they work toward reunification, and underscore the important role that PAT can play for families who are ensnared in this system. Practically, PAT can smooth participants' journeys by helping them to complete their action plans, easing communication with the CPS worker, and advocating for participants throughout the process. And on a deeper level, PAT offers encouragement and hope at a time when participants feel misunderstood and unsupported by the other institutions in their lives. Parent educators help participants believe that they can be capable and successful in their parenting, and, for individuals who are working to regain custody of their children, having this kind of confidence in themselves as parents means everything.

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It's been kind of validating in a way because... like my past history with losing my other three children. You go in there questioning yourself constantly. And for me to have somebody validate me as a parent and as a mother and tell me like: 'No, you're doing a good job. You're doing a good job. He's right where he needs to be. You're a good mom.'

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