



How can an effective border agreement support **timely placement with kin?**

The difficult decision to remove Joey¹ from his birth mother was made in the late morning. His maternal grandmother, with whom he had a close relationship, lived across the Alabama border, just six miles away from Joey's home in Georgia. She immediately agreed to care for Joey until his mother could safely care for him again. Within an hour of the removal decision, Joey's Georgia caseworker had reached out to the Alabama child abuse hotline and requested that a caseworker visit his grandmother to complete a safety study so that the placement could be quickly approved. By dinnertime, Joey was settled in his grandmother's home, a place he felt comfortable and safe. Given the proximity, he also was able to remain in the same school, another source of stability and personal connection. Eventually, Joey formally entered out-of-home care, but he was able to remain with his grandmother the entire time thanks to policies in place between Georgia and Alabama. As a result, he did not suffer the trauma associated with uncertainty that children experience when they are placed in foster care with strangers.



This wasn't always the case

Just a few years ago, children in Alabama or Georgia who had a relative living only a few miles across the border had to wait multiple months to be placed with

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them while the child protection agencies adhered to the requirements of the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC). ICPC was established in 1960 and enacted in all states out of a need to clarify and regulate procedures to ensure the safe placement of children across state lines. While the protections are critical for safety and consistency, they were enacted without an accompanying system for efficiently and securely transferring required data across state lines. Without these electronic business processes, the placement of children across state lines has been fraught by major delays, requiring significant coordination between local and statewide offices across both states in order to transfer information and grant approvals. As a result, these placements can routinely take months or even longer to be finalized. This amount of time can feel like a lifetime to a child, who may be moving from one stranger's home to the next while waiting to be placed with the relative.

A new approach was needed

In 2010, Judge Thomas Britt Hammond of Georgia's Juvenile Court noticed a large number of children were placed in foster care with strangers when there was a relative willing to take them in just miles across the border. He decided to do something about it. Judge Hammond surveyed judges across Georgia and an idea emerged to create a border agreement between Georgia and Alabama border counties to allow non-custodial children to be provisionally placed with relatives during the time of the investigation or assessment. The final border agreement that was created specifies:

- Voluntary placements with kin can be made by parents, who retain custody
- A safety plan is put in place for up to 45 days
- Placements are approved in as few as four hours, and

- If the child protection agency does need to take custody of the child at the end of the assessment or investigation, the child can remain with the relative until the ICPC process is completed.

The judiciary and child welfare agencies involved learned many lessons during the creation of the Georgia-Alabama Border Agreement, as well as implementation considerations for other states interested in establishing similar border agreements.

The negotiation process

Judge Hammond led the process of negotiating and then implementing the agreement in all of the Georgia and Alabama border counties. It took about three years.

Clearing the air

In 2015, the border towns of Columbus, Ga., and Phenix City, Ala., were chosen as the pilots for the agreement, as they had large numbers of children in care being placed with relatives across state lines, especially after hours. The first step in negotiating the agreement involved bringing a range of professionals together from both states, including county office administrators, line staff, state administrators, state policy staff, agency counsel, and ICPC representatives. During those initial meetings, it was discovered that there was a history of ill will and poor communication that had existed between the Columbus and Phenix City offices for decades. Those first few meetings involved clearing the air and committing to a new partnership that was transparent and forward-thinking. The parties eventually adopted the new policies necessary to create an effective border agreement.

Obtaining buy-in at all levels

Obtaining initial buy-in of Alabama and Georgia's central offices — to counter any possible resistance from local offices — was essential. The two state agencies signed

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a memorandum of understanding that laid out the broad terms of the agreement before negotiating the specific border agreement at the county level. In Phenix City, there was initially pushback from the local office, but Alabama state leadership articulated firmly that this was a priority for the agency.

Even with state leadership support, commitment at the local level was needed to make the border agreement effective. Staff needed to perceive the terms as feasible and understand how the policy would benefit them in addition to how it would lead to better outcomes for families. In the beginning, caseworkers in Georgia and Alabama voiced concerns over the amount of work required to adhere to the new timeframes, but they soon realized that the work of the border agreement was simpler than the traditional ICPC process and much better for children than placing them unnecessarily into foster care with strangers.

Finding common ground

Although the two child welfare systems were compatible in many ways, they utilized different terminology. Much of the negotiations were spent working through the terminology and creating a shared language that satisfied both states. When there were differences, the two systems negotiated and found common ground. For example, Georgia had a 30-day

safety plan policy, while Alabama's was 60-day. Their compromise was a 45-day limit for the safety agreement before the case needed to be brought to the attention of the court.

Keep it simple and concise

Georgia and Alabama also sought to keep the border agreement as simple as possible, which was emphasized repeatedly throughout the negotiation process. A four-page framework could have quickly turned into a 20-page document as each involved party added its own content. Since a lengthy agreement would be burdensome for caseworkers, the terms were kept as concise and user-friendly as possible. The jointly formed guidelines included mechanisms for how caseworkers would work together and share information, timeframes for placement, and roles and responsibilities related to setting up and paying for services. The terms also allowed the receiving state to terminate a particular agreement at any time.

The agreement used ICPC as a framework, then addressed the many challenges of ICPC through the mechanics of the border agreement. The terms required that each side would have all the information it needed, that the caseworkers would stay in regular contact with each other, and that they would communicate immediately when a glitch occurred.



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Implementation and training

Once the agreement was created, the jurisdictions developed an implementation plan and mechanism for ongoing communication.

Combined training and regular check-in

Georgia and Alabama decided to hold a joint training, combining staff from both states in one location. This was critical to the success of the border agreement as it led to caseworkers interacting with each other, sometimes for the first time. It fostered a sense of trust and comfort in their working relationships. The agencies committed to a lengthy training, acknowledging that certain offices historically had not worked well together, and it was worth the time investment. Another important strategy was to hold regular check-in calls between all the border counties, at least quarterly, to discuss any challenges or issues that emerged.

Phased-in implementation

Georgia and Alabama decided to wait until the pilot border agreement was in place and staff had worked out all the challenges before expanding to other counties. Once the pilot agreement had proven to be a success, the policy was slowly rolled out in nine Alabama counties and 11 Georgia counties. The process was similar for all the counties. Border counties would start with one of the existing agreements and Judge Hammond would go through it line by line with all of the stakeholders until there was agreement about

what terms would work in those specific locations. This helped to ensure that there was buy-in and commitment at the local level. There were some delays due to weather emergencies and personnel turnover, but the two states were able to implement agreements along the entire border within three to four years.

Managers and champions

In addition to leadership communicating that the border agreement was a priority, the jurisdictions took steps to ensure that managers were monitoring the placements and the agreed-upon timeframes. In Columbus and Phenix City, caseworkers in each county office served enthusiastically as champions during the implementation process and helped educate their peers on the new policy.

Outcomes

In the two years since the pilot border agreement was implemented, about 200 children have been placed quickly and safely with relatives as a result of this policy. Although the overall numbers are not large, these are 200 children who did not have to experience the trauma of being placed with strangers in foster care. While a small percentage of these children did formally enter into custody of the state child welfare system, these children were able to remain in a safe and loving placement with a relative until they could be reunified.

Many of the children returned home to their parents having no idea that the child welfare agency was even involved in their lives.



Key roles and responsibilities

The infographic below outlines key roles and responsibilities of jurisdictions involved in a border agreement:

Sending State



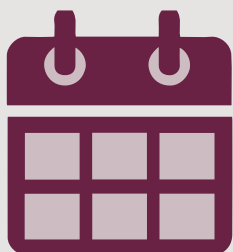
Contact receiving state intake by telephone to request border agreement kinship safety study on identified kin **within one hour** and follow call with written request **within one business day** (fax or email).



Complete safety plan prior to placement of the child(ren) with all signatures of parent(s)/guardian(s). The safety plan will also include provisions for obtaining medical/educational services.



Arrange transportation of child to the approved resource home.



Contact the receiving state the **next business day** via telephone to discuss the need for any immediate services and schedule a family team/individual safety plan meeting. The meeting will be held **no later than three business days** after placement.



Send supporting documentation via ICPC state office to receiving case manager:

- All assessments of child and family
- Permanency plan
- IV-E financial/medical documentation
- Any medical needs of child
- Any other supporting documentation



Provide documentation to receiving state following all meetings.



Communicate frequently with receiving state about any updates/changes.



Until approval, coordination of all protections, services, and supervisory responsibility over the child remain with sending state.



Receiving State



Respond verbally within **one hour** to confirm receipt of border agreement home study request. Provide an estimated time frame for completion of the requested kinship safety study.



Include in border agreement safety study: a preliminary investigation by the receiving state agency; a physical “walk through” of the relative’s home; a record search and completed background checks; verification of kin’s agreement to care for child; and agreement between the states as to what each state will do to support placement.



Provide verbal report of completed kinship safety study **within four hours** of receiving request. Provide a written confirmation report via fax or email during business hours, or the next day if after hours, using the kinship border agreement home study document.



If the border agreement kinship home study is denied for any reason, contact sending state caseworker **within 30 minutes** of denial.



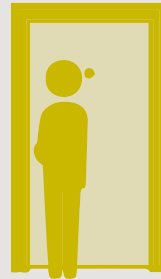
Conduct home visit with child(ren) in the home **within seven days** of placement.



Provide documentation to sending state **within 72 hours** of all visits.



Complete expedited custodial placement home study **within 30 days** of receipt by the receiving state’s ICPC office.



Have the case manager visit the child as mandated by the contact standards of sending state. (In Georgia, the mandated standard was **twice a month**; in Alabama, **once a month**.)

¹ The name of the child in this story has been changed to protect his privacy.

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