

Empowering Families to Keep Kids Safe

Texas Should Expand Alternative Response (AR) to Reduce Involvement with the Child Protection System

An Alternative to Intrusive Investigation of Families

Child Protective Investigations (CPI) plays a crucial role in safeguarding children. However, the traditional approach to investigations often breeds apprehension within families, resulting in a reluctance to collaborate with investigators or participate in services that can keep children safe at home with their families. As a result, this approach may result in the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) removing children from their homes and placing parents on the child abuse registry.

The Alternative Response (AR) approach offers a more supportive and flexible solution, helping families address their challenges without the stigma, anxiety, or long-term consequences associated with traditional CPI investigations.¹ CPI staff will screen reports of abuse or neglect to determine AR eligibility. In an AR case, the caseworker will schedule a meeting directly with the family and encourage the family to invite their support system to the meeting. Instead of focusing on whether a reported incident constitutes abuse, the AR caseworker focuses on assessing the family's needs and identifying solutions within the family's support system and community resources to help prevent the removal of the children. If necessary, an AR case is escalated to a traditional investigation to keep a child safe.

Lacy & Jackson's Story: AR "Made Us a Family"

During her struggle with addiction and entry into treatment, Lacey faced concerns about her children's safety. AR provided the support she needed. "It wasn't scary," Lacy recalls. "When people think of CPS, 'oh my gosh, we're scared!' or whatever? I just felt secure. That's a good way to say it – secure – like everything is going to be ok." Her son Jackson's frustration with his mother's addiction catalyzed Lacey's decision to change. "Hearing from Jackson, he was pretty much ready to give up on her," their caseworker, Chad Rogers, recounted. Chad was able to meet with the family to determine what resources or services the family needed to "get them in a better spot" and connect them to those supports. Lacy's recovery strengthened her family bonds, making them "a family."²

"[H]earing how my kids felt was an eye-opener ...

I think the Alternative Response is great. I mean, I think it helped me keep my family together ... "

– Lacy, a mom who participated in AR

"[It] made us a family."

– Jackson, Lacy's son

If expanded, AR can help more families with young children get needed services and stay safe together.

Current Use of AR in Texas, Including the El Paso Pilot Expansion: Texas currently limits AR to low- to moderate-risk cases involving children six and older. Those restrictions significantly limit the use of AR. In FY 2023, nearly two-thirds of Texas children removed by DFPS were under the age of six.³ A pilot in El Paso launched in February 2024 extends AR services to children of all ages. Since the launch of the pilot, El Paso has increased the percentage of Priority 2 cases (i.e., cases with no immediate risk of serious harm or death) that are handled through AR from 20% to 50%, showing that many families with young kids could benefit from this less intrusive approach.⁴ This pilot is part of the DFPS strategic plan to expand AR in 2024, but additional funding is needed to sustain the work in El Paso and scale expansion statewide.⁵

Success in Texas: During FY 2022, 90% (37,765 cases) of AR cases were resolved without needing further, more intrusive actions like a traditional investigation or family preservation case.⁶ Since its statewide rollout in March 2021, traditional investigations have constituted 80% of CPI interventions, while AR has accounted for the remaining 20%.⁷ Caseworkers often resolve AR cases quickly, with the average case remaining open for only 43 days, so DFPS is not intervening in families' lives for extended periods.⁸ In some cases, AR cases may remain open longer than traditional investigations to address safety concerns without subsequent interventions.

Success Outside of Texas: 29 other states use AR (also called Differential Response or Family Assessment). States like Arkansas, Nebraska, and Washington have seen reduced foster care placements, improved access to resources and services, and significant cost savings to the state through AR.^{9,10,11,12} For example, a six-state study showed that more frequent use of AR was linked to fewer repeat reports of child abuse and fewer confirmed cases of ongoing abuse.¹³ Some states, such as Ohio, report benefits such as decreased caseworker turnover in AR-specific units.¹⁴ Most other states use AR more expansively than Texas and have less strict eligibility criteria.¹⁵

Legislators should appropriate funds to expand AR.

- **Funding for IMPACT System Enhancement** would allow caseworkers to pivot from traditional investigations to AR when appropriate.
- **Funding for Additional CPI Screening Staff** would allow DFPS to screen and refer more cases to AR.

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