

RETHINKING CHILD WELFARE: THE SAFE BABIES COURT TEAM APPROACH

By Eva Morales

There is much talk about the “crucial days of childhood” when it comes to the practice of juvenile law, and the most crucial of these days are those within the first three years of a child’s life.¹

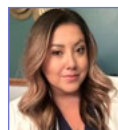
Every seven minutes, an infant or toddler in the United States is removed from their home, and children under the age of three make up the largest age group of those entering the foster care system.² The impact of abuse and neglect in early childhood is apparent now more than ever due to the litany of research on early brain development that has surged in recent years. This highlights the sweeping need for innovative approaches and reform where the legal system and social work profession intersect: child welfare.

The Safe Babies Court Team (SBCT) approach is taking on this challenge. Supported by the national nonprofit Zero to Three and the National Infant-Toddler Court Program, SBCT is a collaborative, trauma-informed approach to resolving child welfare cases involving infants and toddlers. The approach applies the science of early childhood development to meet the needs of young children and families under the court’s jurisdiction. Families are quickly connected to intensive support and services and a multidisciplinary team made up of professionals trained in trauma-informed practices works collaboratively with enhanced judicial oversight to reduce the time a child spends in out-of-home placement and improving long-term outcomes for families.

Polk County, Iowa, was the pilot jurisdiction for implementing this approach and has operated a Safe Babies Court Team since 2005. Since then, Polk County has served as a

demonstration site for other jurisdictions looking to introduce the SBCT approach, and the initiative has since expanded to more than 80 sites across the country.³ Participation in SBCT is voluntary and at the family’s discretion, but the evidence is clear: there are positive outcomes for children and families who choose to participate. In 2020, the American Institute of Research evaluated three SBCT sites located in Little Rock, Arkansas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Des Moines, Iowa. The study showed that children in courts deploying the SBCT model exited foster care four months earlier than children undergoing conventional court proceedings.⁴ Furthermore, cases that received the full SBCT approach were five times less likely to experience a recurrence of abuse or neglect.⁵

The need for change is compelling, given that the data and SBCTs demonstrate that sustainable, positive impact is attainable. Systemic transformation is rooted at the local level and driven by individuals who are committed to this collaborative effort. The local work of SBCTs and their results can ignite policy changes at the state and federal level.⁶ When stakeholders come together in this collective manner, the system champions children, encourages parents, and engages the community⁷ as best practices are redesigned for improving the child welfare system and advancing racial equity and social justice.



Eva Morales is a first-generation Latina working as an Assistant County Attorney in Des Moines, Iowa. She is one of two prosecutors on Polk County’s Safe Babies Court Team and handles exclusively child welfare and delinquency cases.

Outside of work, Eva is a member of various associations, boards, and committees. She enjoys working with youth and providing mentorship, especially to students from underrepresented populations. Eva is also a military wife and a mother of two little girls. She is actively involved with her family and devoted to leading by example for her daughters.

¹ See *In re A.C.*, 415 N.W.2d 609, 613 (Iowa 1987).

² See *Child Welfare, Zero to Three*, <https://www.zerotothree.org/issue-areas/child-welfare/> (last visited June 28, 2023).

³ See *How Does the Safe Babies Court Team Approach Improve Outcomes for Infants and Toddlers?*, Casey Family Programs (Dec. 18, 2019), <https://www.casey.org/safe-babies-court-teams/>

⁴ Ann-Marie Faria, Et. Al., *The Safe Babies Court Team Evaluation: Changing the Trajectories of Children in Foster Care* (American Institutes for Research 2020).

⁵ Id.

