

# THE SAFE & TOGETHER MODEL™ COLLABORATION KICKSTARTER PROJECT: Doña Ana, New Mexico



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# INTRODUCTION

## ABOUT THE SAFE & TOGETHER INSTITUTE

The Safe & Together Institute's mission is to create, nurture, and sustain a global network of domestic violence-informed child and family-serving professionals, communities, and systems. The Safe & Together™ Model is an internally-recognized suite of tools and interventions designed to help child and family-serving systems improve outcomes by practicing from a domestic violence-informed perspective. The Institute teaches these tools and interventions with the goal of supporting sustainable change and full integration into local agencies.



## ABOUT THE COLLABORATION KICKSTARTER PILOT PROJECT

The Safe & Together Institute (S&TI) and New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department (NM CYFD) have a robust history of partnering together to implement domestic-violence informed practices. Through the Safe and Together™ Model Advocate/CYFD Collaboration Kickstarter Pilot project (referred to below as 'the project'), NM CYFD and S&TI partnered with La Casa, Inc., one of the largest providers of domestic violence services in New Mexico, in an effort to improve collaboration between local domestic violence advocates and county CYFD staff in Doña Ana County and to produce a replicable, time-limited relationship kickstarter process that can be implemented in other New Mexico counties.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT EVALUATION

S&TI's Evaluation Team implemented a comprehensive retrospective pre/posttest survey with both Doña Ana CYFD and La Casa, Inc. project participants asking them to reflect on changes in their relationship with the other agency over the course of the project. To discern whether changes between the two agencies were a result of the project, a control group of domestic violence advocates and CYFD staff from a similar New Mexico county were surveyed on their working relationship with one another over the same five-month period. In addition, S&TI Evaluation Team members sat in and observed multiple project meetings and reviewed facilitator notes from coaching sessions with leadership and staff from both agencies to collect qualitative data on the project's impact on language and practice skills as well as other evident changes in the relationship between staff from Doña Ana CYFD and La Casa, Inc. The following sections describe the results of the Collaboration Kickstarter Project.

# PROJECT OVERVIEW

While they often work with the same clients and with the same overall goal of safer, stronger families, child protection and domestic violence agencies' relationships are often tense and overrun with conflicts around advocates' confidentiality, the revictimization of domestic violence victims by child protection, and differing philosophies and mandates. The Kickstarter Project was designed to improve communication and collaboration between La Casa, Inc. and Doña Ana County CYFD staff as well as to build their skills and confidence in domestic violence-informed practice. Over a five-month period, the Safe & Together Institute engaged leadership and frontline staff in both agencies through a series of activities aimed at improving understanding of the Model and cross-agency collaboration. Activities included:

## 1 TRAINING THROUGH E-LEARNING COURSES & LIVE REMOTE SESSIONS



Prior to the start of the project, participants were given access to the Institute's Virtual Academy and completed foundational e-learning courses in the Safe & Together™ Model and the basics of domestic violence-informed practice. Participants also engaged in monthly All Project virtual training sessions facilitated live by senior S&TI faculty.

## 2 SAFE & TOGETHER™ MODEL TOOLS



Participants were also given access to A suite of practice tools from the Institute including the Ally Guide, Choose to Change Tool Kit, Understanding My Parenting Strengths, and the Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool. Participants were coached by senior S&TI faculty in how to not only implement these tools with clients, but also in how to use them to create a shared language, framework, and practice across agencies.

## 3 MONTHLY COACHING SESSIONS



Coaching can dramatically increase training participants' capacity for applying the learned skills and tools in their day-to-day practice. In this project, each agency's participants received coaching and guidance from S&TI faculty tailored to their sector.

La Casa, Inc. advocates received coaching specifically related to using Safe & Together™ Model tools to 1) discuss the role of the perpetrator with CYFD cases involving domestic violence, and 2) advocate for survivors while using strategies for communicating client protective capacities with CYFD staff.

Doña Ana CYFD Staff received coaching specifically related to using the Model's tools to 1) improve work with families and domestic violence cases – particularly intervening with the perpetrator, discussing the role of the perpetrator, and partnering with survivors – and 2) facilitating meetings/discussion of complex cases involving domestic violence and other issues.

## 4 AGENCY LEADERSHIP TEAM MEETINGS



Leadership buy-in and support is key to any pilot project. Leadership members from both agencies in Doña Ana were engaged from the start and met monthly with S&TI senior staff to discuss project progress and sustainability.

# PROJECT OVERVIEW

After engaging in project activities, participants noted improvements in their working relationships across agencies as well as in their individual practice skills and confidence in working with families impacted by domestic violence. Participants reported feeling more effective in working together to improve client outcomes and a sense of built collaboration and trust in one another. Doña Ana CYFD staff reported increased confidence in intervening with perpetrators as parents and partnering with the adult survivor. La Casa, Inc. staff reported improvements in describing perpetrator behaviors and advocating for CYFD-involved clients.

**BEFORE the project Doña Ana County CYFD and La Casa, Inc. staff described their relationship with one another as:**



**ADVERSARIAL**



**ROCKY**



**FRACTURED**



**MINIMAL**

**AFTER the project Doña Ana County CYFD and La Casa, Inc. staff described their relationship with one another as:**



**COLLABORATIVE**



**MENDING**



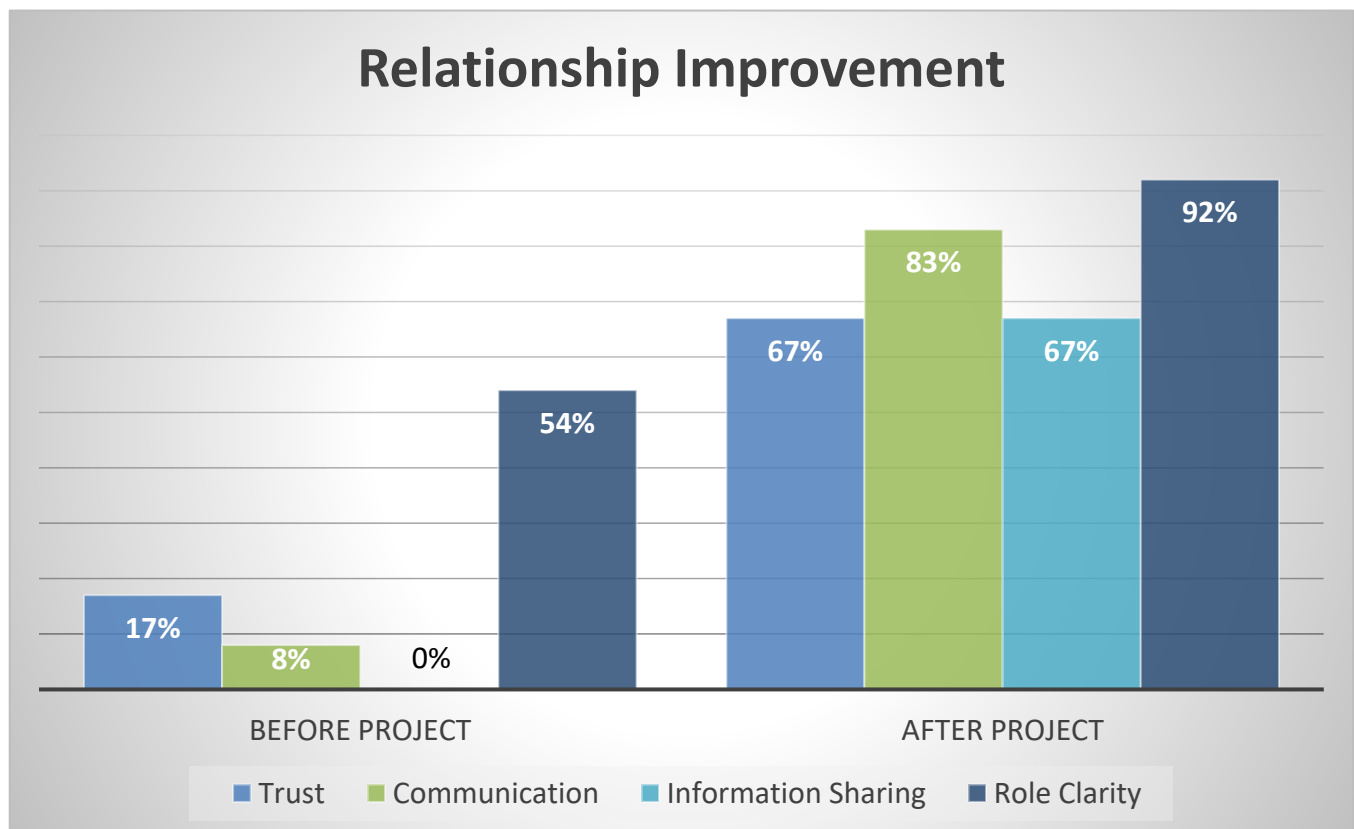
**IMPROVED**



**PARTNERSHIP**

## Collaboration & Relationship Improvement

After the project, the majority of participants agreed that there was trust between the two agencies, that they communicated openly and were informed as often as they should be about shared clients, Participants also reported greater understanding of each agency's unique role and responsibilities.



# PROJECT SUCCESS STORIES



While all pilot participants agreed it was too early in the project for major changes in client outcomes, the group did share powerful success stories of promising shifts in the system.

## Improved Survivor Experiences In The CYFD System

Representatives from both agencies described the tangible difference it makes in a survivor's experiences when they have systems working together and actively partnering with them. This is invaluable for clients. La Casa, Inc. staff shared that **clients seem happier in their CYFD interactions, and less stressed due to the stronger communication between agencies**. One Doña Ana CYFD leader described being impressed by the depth of information caseworkers are documenting in high profile cases, which they noted has resulted in less questioning of decisions by the chain of command, making the experience less traumatic for families. Additionally, workers are doing stronger safety planning around domestic violence and specific perpetrator behaviors, making it possible to manage safety within the home more often. Another CYFD leader shared that even the shift in language used to talk about survivors and domestic violence has had a positive impact on families.

## Excitement Among Pilot Participants

There has been a visible shift in excitement about the work among pilot participants. One CYFD leader shared that training or meetings on new practice models can often be low energy or boring, but they could tell their staff actually believe the Safe & Together™ Model is helping them and it's energizing. The Model gives staff and leadership the motivation to continue the work and replicate it in different counties. La Casa staff echoed this sentiment, saying **they are excited and passionate about what the project is aiming for and where it is headed**. They have lots of ideas for how to bring this approach into new areas of the program.

## Ripple Effect Within Agencies

CYFD staff reported that they are already seeing an impact of the project beyond its participants. They see the effects rippling out, with **the Model and its tools influencing facilitation of meetings, documentation, and intra-agency collaboration overall**. La Casa, Inc. staff shared similar reflections, including that a small number of people mastering tools can help reach a larger number of people. They have noticed greater excitement, collaboration, and interest in the Safe & Together™ Model from CYFD workers not involved in the pilot.

## Reinvigorating Interest In The Safe & Together™ Model

Project participants reported that this project has reignited practitioner interest in a practice model the state has supported for years. Despite being trained on the Safe & Together™ Model in orientation, CYFD staff were not consistently using its language or practice tools. Now that staff have seen a more robust demonstration of the Model and its impact, **it is increasingly being utilized in pre-initiation staffing, investigation assessments, cap staffing, and supervision**. Similarly, the Model is now in use in La Casa's Child & Youth Program and the affiliated Batterer's Intervention Program (B.I.P.).

## Impacts On System Players Not In Project

La Casa staff shared that **other agencies have learned about the project and are curious about partnering** as well. Specifically, the city government reached out about working with La Casa to do some additional work in the community after hearing about this collaboration!

# KEY FINDINGS

## COLLABORATION & RELATIONSHIP IMPROVEMENT



**Objective #1** Improve cross-agency collaboration and the overall relationship between Doña Ana CYFD staff and La Casa, Inc. advocates

CYFD and La Casa program participants were asked about changes in their relationships since the beginning of the pilot program. Specifically, they described improvements in the following areas: Effectiveness, Communication, Inter-Agency Trust, Flexibility, Shared Purpose, Professional Roles and Commitment to Collaboration. See specific findings below.

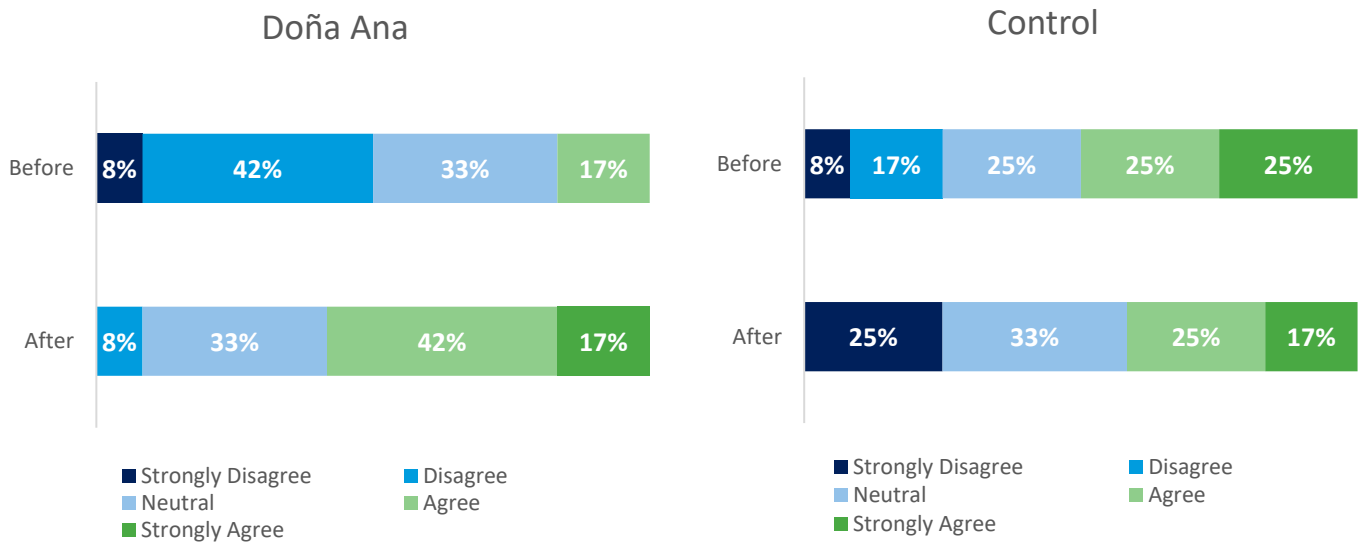
### 1 EFFECTIVENESS



La Casa and CYFD staff are now sharing pieces and collaborating with the survivor and each other, instead of collaborating with the survivor separately on the same puzzle. This is beneficial to families because the care is more comprehensive, and everyone is working toward the same goals

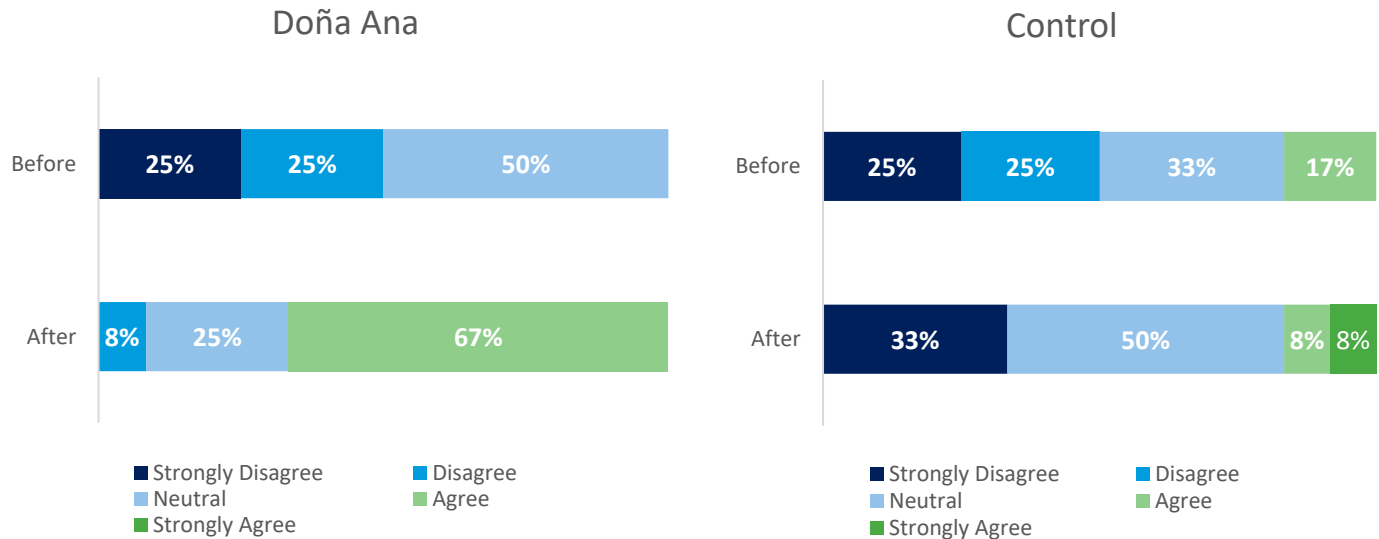
After participating in the project, the majority of La Casa and Doña Ana CYFD staff reported they ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that they **worked closely with the other agency to support CYFD-involved survivors** and families (**59%, compared to 17% before**) and that they were **informed as often as they should be** about what is going on with a survivor/client at the other agency (**67%, compared to 0% before**). In contrast, the control county showed no or negative change in these measures over the test period.

I worked closely with DV Advocates/Case Workers to support system-involved survivors and families



# KEY FINDINGS

I was informed as often as I should be about what is going on with a survivor/client at the other agency



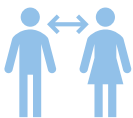
## 2 COMMUNICATION



The agencies are speaking more, both at the level of leadership and direct client service. There was more friction and tension before, but now staff **feel more comfortable reaching out to each other** to ask for help. They do a good job keeping each other up-to-date. They shared that it feels good to have these conversations.

After participating in the project, the majority (**83%, compared to 8% before**) of La Casa and Doña Ana CYFD staff reported they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they **communicated openly with each other**. In contrast, the control county showed little change in openness of communication over the test period.

## 3 INTER-AGENCY TRUST



There is greater trust between staff from each agency. Now they have met, they have faces to put to names, and relationships are being built. Other trust-building components mentioned included **familiarity with each others' processes, shared tools and language**, and identified points of contact that can be reached. This trust extends to not only calling folks to handle current issues, but also to collaborating to manage issues that may happen in the future.

After participating in the project, the majority (**67%, compare to 17% before**) of La Casa and Doña Ana CYFD staff reported they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they **trusted one another**. In contrast, the control county showed no or negative change in perceived trust over the test period.

# KEY FINDINGS

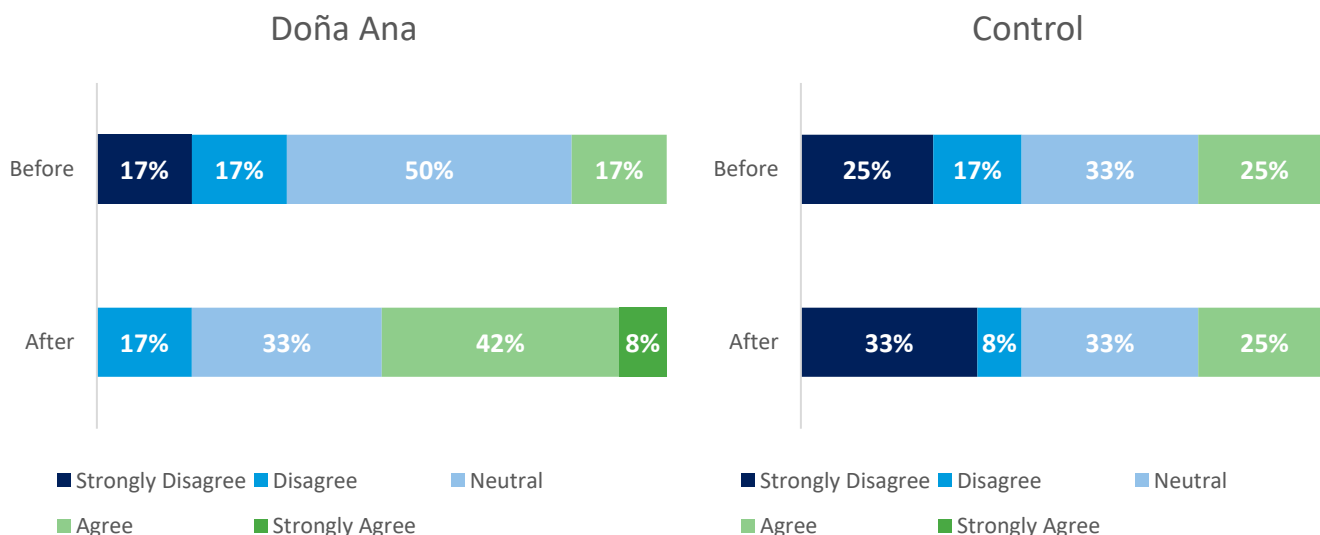
## 4 FLEXIBILITY



Before the project, one La Casa staff member described the relationship between agencies as 'rigid.' Confidentiality guidelines often made it difficult to share information and to work together. Participants in the project came to the table open, wanting to learn to be better and to partner better together. Now, **both agencies understand more about the nuances and limits of confidentiality** and have been able to expand their information sharing in mutually supportive, survivor-led ways. Additionally, both agencies now **make fewer assumptions** about the others' reasoning behind actions, and better understand their perspectives.

After participating in the project, half (**50%, compared to 17% before**) of La Casa and Doña Ana CYFD staff reported they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they were **willing to compromise for the good of survivors and families**. In contrast to the control county, where willingness compromise is reported as a contentious issue that actually worsened over the test period. See chart below.

DV Advocates/CPS Case Workers and I are willing to compromise for the good of survivors and families



## 5 SHARED PURPOSE



La Casa and CYFD both expressed an **increase in understanding that both agencies have the same end goal** and desired outcomes. Even though they each have their own mandates and service array, they are serving many of the same children and families, and ultimately seek to promote their safety and well-being.

After participating in the project, nearly all (**92%, compared to 67% before**) of La Casa and Doña Ana CYFD staff reported they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that **both agencies shared a high level of commitment to survivors and families' well being**. In contrast, the test county showed a negative shift in perceived commitment of both agencies over the test period.



# KEY FINDINGS

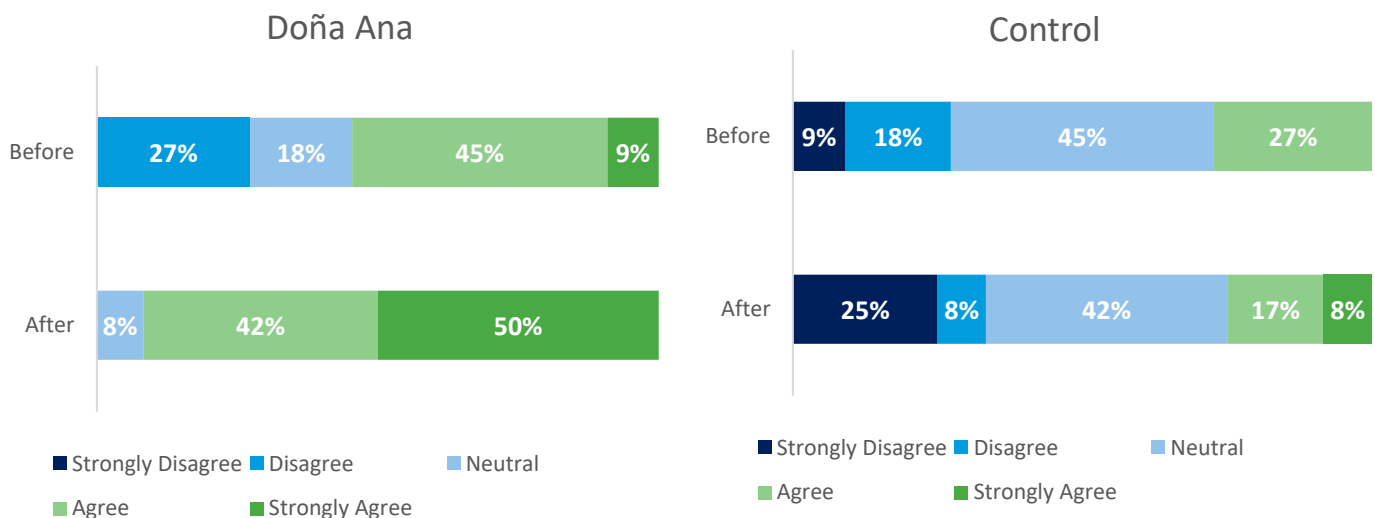
## 6 PROFESSIONAL ROLES



There is **now greater mutual understanding and appreciation** for what each agency does, including its role, policies and procedures. This has helped guide collaboration and given CYFD a new operationalization of how to truly partner with an agency.

After participating in the project, nearly all (**92%, compared to 54% before**) of La Casa and Doña Ana CYFD staff reported they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they each had a **clear sense of each other's unique roles and responsibilities**. In contrast, the control county reported little understanding of roles at both points of the test period. See chart below:

DV Advocates/CPS Case Workers and I each had a clear sense of our unique roles and responsibilities



## 7 COMMITMENT TO COLLABORATION



Each agency's leadership is **dedicated to intentionally cultivating a good relationship** to be able to collaborate to improve survivors' and families' outcomes. This willingness to work together has spread even beyond the pilot participants, with each agency noting a **more collegial, collaborative tone in inter-agency interactions even in staff not involved** with the project. There was a collective desire for ongoing cross-agency meetings and strategies for sustaining collaborative processes and relationships.

After participating in the project, **all (100%, compared to 45% before)** of La Casa and Doña Ana CYFD staff reported they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they were **dedicated to the idea that they could improve their relationship**, and that they honored commitments to one another. In contrast, the control county showed no change in these measures over the test period.

# KEY FINDINGS

## CONFIDENCE & SKILLS – DOÑA ANA CYFD



**Objective #2** Build CYFD staff's confidence & skills in intervening with domestic violence perpetrators as parents

During coaching sessions, participants reflected on shifts in their work with perpetrators in focused dialogues on the project. In one June meeting – about four months into the project – a CYFD staff member shared that it had become **easier to get information** about the perpetrator's behavior from the family since the beginning of the project. By using the Safe & Together™ Model tools and working alongside domestic violence advocates and the survivor, CYFD staff were **better able to document** a fuller picture of the pattern of abuse.

Another participant shared that they had seen **changes in language** in case documentation, specifically naming the aggressor and calling for accountability for the perpetrator. Two additional participants shared that the **mapping tool** enabled them to find evidence of perpetrator's patterns in affidavits and provided direction for questions to ask as a follow-up with the accused. Indeed, CYFD reported that staff are feeling **less afraid** to question perpetrators, **engaging perpetrators more**, asking them about specific incidents from police reports, and telling them how their behavior is impacting the child. They reported having some cases where the perpetrator has subsequently newly seen the negative impact he's had on his children and has joined the planning of the intervention with the family.

At the close of the project, CYFD staff described the integration of the Safe & together™ Model **Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool** as making a **historical, monumental difference** in their agency's work with perpetrators.

These same feelings of improved confidence to intervene and engage domestic violence perpetrators are also reflected in the retrospective pre/post survey. After the project, Doña Ana CYFD staff reported improved confidence with **no (0%) participants reporting they had 'no confidence'** in intervening/engaging with domestic violence perpetrators compared with 16% before the project.

# KEY FINDINGS

## CONFIDENCE & SKILLS – DOÑA ANA CYFD



**Objective #3** Increase CYFD staff's confidence & skills in partnering with adult domestic violence survivors

Doña Ana CYFD staff, following the project, reported improved confidence in their ability to partner with domestic violence survivors with **67% reporting feeling 'strong' or 'complete' confidence** after the project compared to 50% before. Fewer participants indicated they had 'no' confidence (0%) after the project than before (16%). In contrast the control county showed little change in confidence over the test period.

CYFD Investigators described a significant change in their communication with survivors, specifically around their **language and presentation of information**. They reported **shifting their focus to the perpetrator** and his behaviors when speaking to the survivor, rather than making her feel like the abuse is her fault. For example, investigators might say, "I am here because your husband chose to be violent last night." Additionally, investigators and CYFD staff are also doing more to help survivors recognize their partners' patterns of abusive behavior, sharing that CYFD is here to support survivors, and **asking how they can help**. With this change, investigators report that survivors don't get as upset as they did when they felt they were being held accountable for the abuse. Since they feel CYFD is not here to take their children, they are more likely to open up about what is going on in the home.

Similarly, due to increased trust and collaboration with La Casa, Inc., **advocates feel more comfortable providing a bigger picture** of the family system with CYFD staff than they were previously, including the survivor's strengths and the perpetrator's impacts on the family. Because it can be easier for survivors to talk with advocates than child protection workers, CYFD staff report they often end up having better information that they can use to more effectively partner with the survivor. Having a better handle on perpetrators' patterns of behavior has led to better safety or support planning, and better resource connections. In many cases, CYFD is more often **recognizing plans the survivor already has in place** and the protective actions she is taking to protect her children, so there is less need for legal intervention.

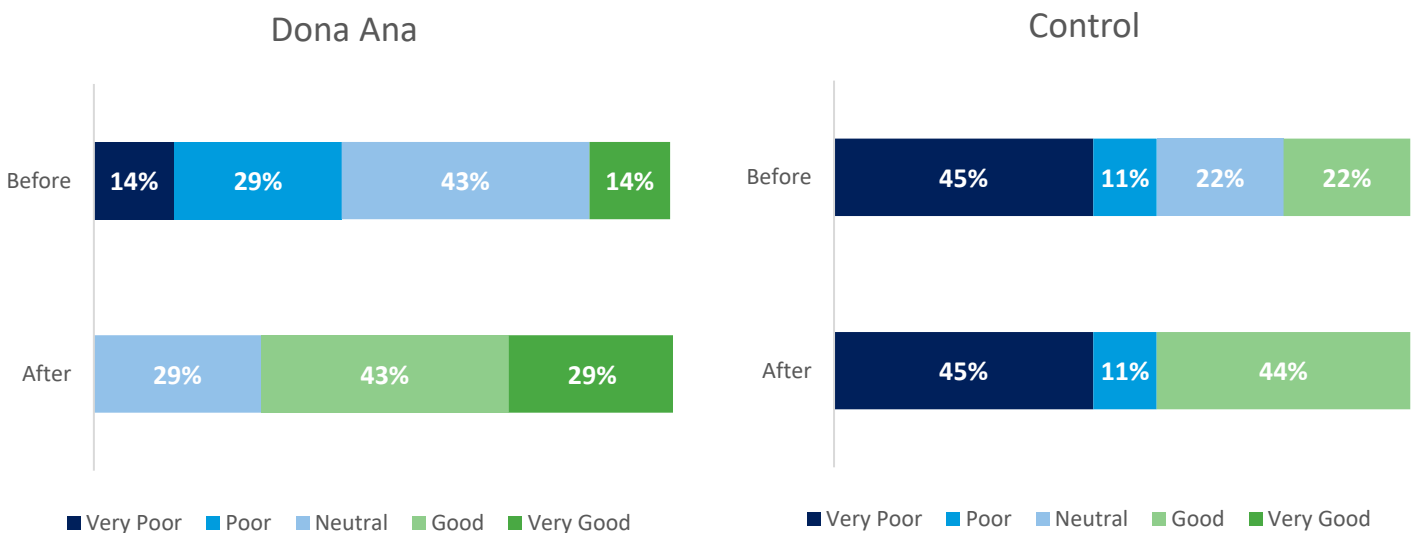
# KEY FINDINGS

## CONFIDENCE & SKILLS – DOÑA ANA CYFD

A La Casa, Inc. staff member also shared that they have seen a **huge shift in how CYFD approaches domestic violence situations**, noting a decrease in victim blaming, avoidance of stereotypes, and a greater regard for survivors. La Casa staff also noted a positive **shift in shelter residents' perceptions of their relationships with their CYFD case workers**. Instead of generic, negative references to CPS, residents are now talking about their CYFD case workers by name and describing positively the help they are providing. It's a more personal working relationship, and they are often excited to meet with their case workers.

**Before the project, only 14%** of La Casa, Inc. staff indicated they would rate their clients' experience with CYFD case workers as 'good' or 'very good'. **Following the project, nearly three-quarters (72%)** of La Casa, Inc. staff indicated their client's experiences with CYFD were 'good' or 'very good'. In contrast, the control county showed little improvement, and generally poor view in how clients would rate their experience with case workers.

How would you rate your clients' experience with CYFD Case Workers?



# KEY FINDINGS

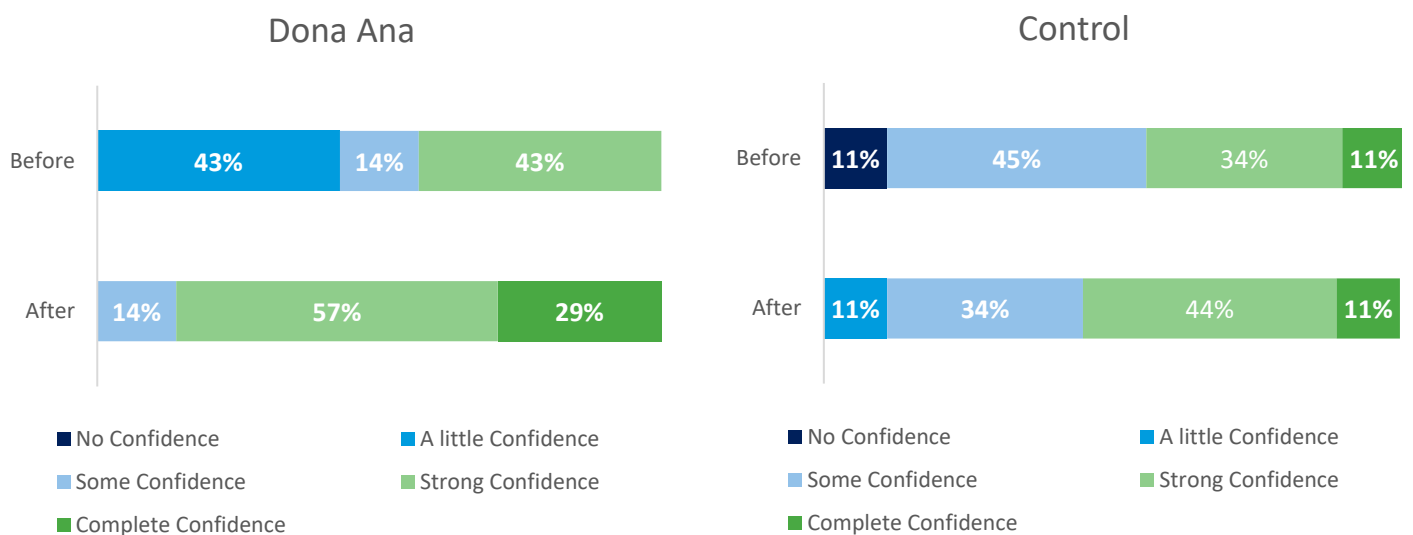
## CONFIDENCE & SKILLS – LA CASA, INC. ADVOCATES



**Objective #4** Increase La Casa advocates' confidence & skills in describing domestic violence perpetrators' patterns of behavior

After engaging in this project, La Casa staff were **more likely to share information about the perpetrator** with CYFD. Before the project, under half (43%) of La Casa staff reported feeling 'strong' confidence in discussing the perpetrator's role in domestic/family violence with Child Protection Workers, with no (0%) staff report 'complete' confidence. After the project the majority (86%) reported feeling 'strong' (57%) or 'complete' (29%) confidence. The control county showed little change in confidence in discussing the perpetrator's role in domestic/family violence with Child Protection Workers over the test period. See chart below:

How would you rate your level of confidence in discussing the perpetrator's role in domestic/family violence with child protection workers?



Some La Casa, Inc. staff members had not realized before the project that there was a different standard of confidentiality for information about survivors versus information about perpetrators. So, while they may not be able to share survivor information with CYFD, they **learned that they could share information on the perpetrator** to help the agency gain a fuller picture of the situation. This led to La Casa staff providing more information about perpetrator impacts to CYFD, which informed their documentation and case planning.

Supervisors reported **using the Safe & Together™ Model Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool to review and give feedback** on documentation submitted by staff, to ensure they are using appropriate and descriptive language. For example, instead of referring to the child as a “witness to domestic violence” they are naming the perpetrator and making him visible – clearly articulating how perpetrators are making a parenting choice when they abuse their partners. One of the advocates who works with the Batterers Intervention group reported using the Mapping Tool to overhaul that program, changing how they’re doing things to be more in alignment with the Model.

# KEY FINDINGS

## CONFIDENCE & SKILLS – LA CASA, INC. ADVOCATES



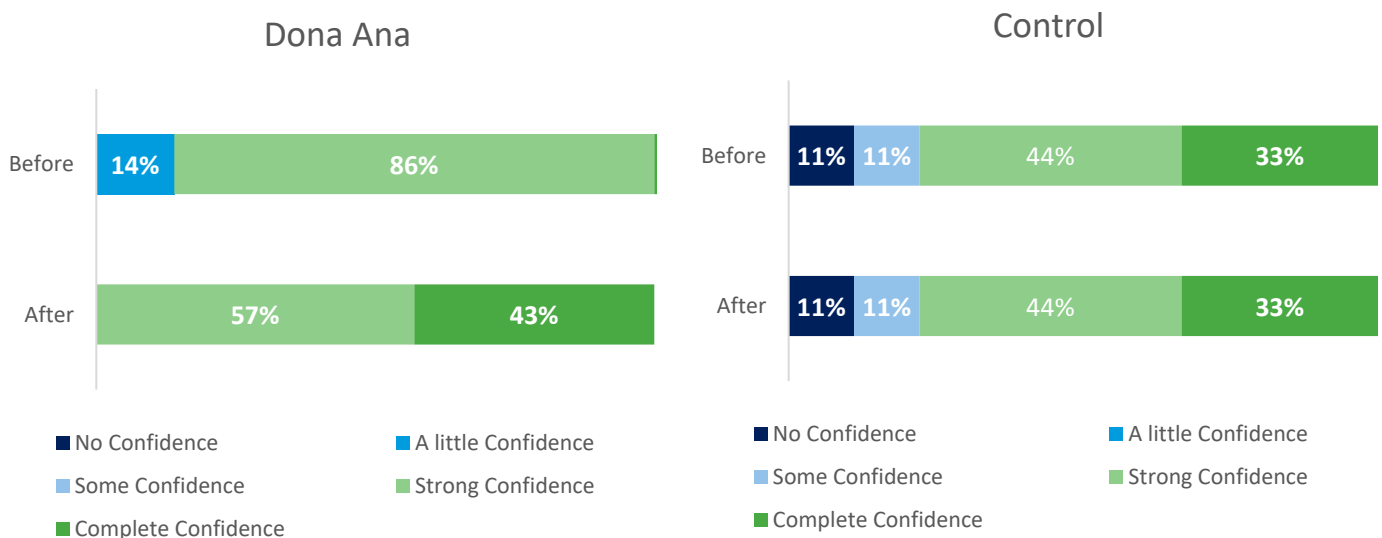
**Objective #5** Build La Casa advocates' confidence & skills in advocating for CYFD-involved clients

La Casa, Inc. advocates described **several improvements in their internal efforts to enhance their advocacy** with CYFD-involved clients. One supervisor had her staff change their intake process to ensure clients involved with CYFD are asked to identify their case worker and also informed about the option and benefits of having a **Release of Information** in place with CYFD. Advocates described being better able to describe to clients how La Casa Advocates and CYFD can work together. The agency has also **implemented the tool Understanding My Survivor Strengths** in the Children & Youth Program to develop a better rapport and relationship with survivors. This tool has proven effective in showing survivors how they can build on their existing strengths in their parenting; and in helping advocates and survivors work together to describe these strengths to CYFD when needed.

La Casa staff also described **improvements in their confidence and skills in interactions with CYFD** staff. They feel they are now better able to communicate with CYFD due to a new shared language and growing trust between the two agencies. La Casa staff described greater ease in navigating challenging child welfare-related situations, as they have a greater understanding of how the system works, what the rules are, and who they can call if they have questions. They are building personal relationships and learning to collaborate with CYFD staff, working side-by-side with families and wordsmithing documentation together to highlight survivor strengths and perpetrator patterns. La Casa staff are better able to ease tension between the agencies by providing context and explaining survivor behaviors and choices.

After the project, **All (100%) of La Casa staff reported** on the retrospective pre/post survey feeling '**strong**' or '**complete**' confidence in advocating for CYFD-involved clients. In contrast, the control county showed no change in confidence over the test period.

How would you rate your level of confidence to advocate for child welfare involved clients?



# TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## LESSONS LEARNED

The Safe and Together™ Model New Mexico Collaboration Kickstarter Pilot project has had a positive impact on the working relationship between La Casa, Inc. domestic violence advocates and Doña Ana CYFD child protection staff. Practitioners at both agencies have increased their knowledge and skills in domestic violence-informed practice and are communicating more frequently and openly with each other as well as finding common ways to better support domestic violence survivors.

At the close of the project, all participants were asked to reflect on their experience and share some highlights and takeaways. Many participants noted the importance of outlining early on how each agency can use their respective roles to guide and advocate for their shared clients/families, and always keeping families at the center of their shared work. Others noted the importance of having a representative cross-section of staff from each agency, and of encouraging open and honest communication - even when difficult. These are necessary to improve understanding and collaboration.

'What lessons learned would you like to share with other communities undertaking this kind of collaboration project?'

### 1 DEVELOP A 'CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF ROLES AND GOALS'



"Child Protection Case Workers have their own limitations and confidentiality just like Domestic Violence Advocates. Working together we can guarantee that the same verbiage and language are being used. To create this ripple effect toward the holistic view of a family, but then also towards other community agencies and resources."

"This project strengthened the understanding of our roles to help serve the clients in our community. Because of this project, we are now able to communicate more effectively. There is also a clear understanding of our roles and what we can and can't do."

### 2 CENTER ON THOSE YOU SERVE



"Really focus on centering those you serve; understand that communication is key as you may make assumptions about an agency's policies regarding Child Welfare but until you connect with the team, you will be uncertain if agency's goals align or not."

### 3 BE READY FOR TOUGH CONVERSATIONS



"I think they would need to know that things need to be discussed open and honestly to overcome barriers that may be present. Tough conversations will need to be had."

### 4 CHOOSE PROJECT PARTICIPANTS WITH CARE



"Ensure that your team is carefully selected and represents a cross-section of service areas within your agency and that selected members have a passion for this type of work/collaboration and will likely stay at the agency longer term."

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