

BUILDING ON SUCCESS: PARENT PARTNERS IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Ayse Dogan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child welfare agencies throughout California need to decide how to implement the state's mandate to include family support partners in Child and Family Team meetings under the Katie

A. Settlement for children in or about to enter foster care. Some counties, such as Contra Costa, already have established programs that integrate full-time peer parents, or Parent Partners, who are successful former clients, to counsel, mentor and provide support for current families. Others, such as San Mateo County, which does not currently have an active peer parent program, have a choice. Should San Mateo County view peer parents as a minor or unnecessary part of ongoing Child and Family Teams? Or should the county view them as a way to actively and positively transform how the county works with client families?

This evaluation of Contra Costa County's Parent Partners Program suggests that this more active, engaging approach can be very successful. Some of the benefits are measurable, such as higher family reunification rates. What especially stands out, however, is how the Parent Partners Program transforms the relationship between the social welfare agency and client families. The program provides a positive, proactive approach in the spirit of people helping people. It

effectively brings the community, including those who have successfully dealt with similar challenges, into supporting and guiding families in learning new models. By treating Parent Partners as full team members with ongoing supervision, involvement and teamwork, the program creates a model for the partners to also work with families. Families see that success is possible and have someone to turn to through the inevitable ups and downs of the case process. Parent Partners thus provide both the social worker and the family crucial allies, enabling the agency to be more effective in helping children and families.

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The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago.

The second best time is today.

-- Chinese Proverb

Introduction

No family receiving services under child welfare became troubled overnight. The origins of individual cases often go back many years or even generations. Clients themselves generally did not have effective parenting models in their own childhoods. Against these powerful pressures from the past, child welfare has a limited time to truly be effective in helping families learn new parenting models. How can this opportunity to provide new models be used most effectively? Nothing in a family's history can be changed, but life is always lived today, it is always moving forward. Those past clients who have been most successful in transforming their own lives and families—those who have learned new parenting models and had to deal with the challenges involved--can be very effective in helping today's recipient families. These past clients serve as partners both for current families as well as child welfare agencies. This is the philosophy of the

Parent Partners Program (PP), which is a keystone for child welfare in Contra Costa County. It holds significant promise for other counties willing to seriously invest in the PP approach.

Approximately three years ago San Mateo County made a modest commitment toward the development of a parent partners program. A core workgroup was formed, a job description was created, and the parent partner role was identified. Unfortunately, due to delay in identifying funding, the program was put on hold. The purpose of this case study is to assess the merits of an active program and determine what it would take to be successful by looking at Contra Costa County's program, and making specific recommendations for San Mateo County.

Origin of Parent Partners in California and Contra Costa County

Parent Partners grew directly out of California's Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act of 2004 (AB 636). The Act required significant actions to improve outcomes for children and families. One of its major recommendations was Parent Partners, a client-based practice that engages family and community partners and aligns with other child welfare practices, such as Team Decision-Making, Family Finding and fatherhood engagement. PP differs from other child welfare practices in one crucial way: former clients are recruited, selected and trained to become mentors, guides and advocates. The parent partner works directly with the recipient family and the social worker. A recipient family's participation in the program is voluntary and provided only with its consent. Who are the Parent Partners? Each parent

partner experienced removal of his or her own children, received services from a child welfare agency and successfully reunified with their children. The program does not require a perfectly clean background check but mandates a minimum of one year of successful sobriety and reunification.

Contra Costa County began implementing its PP Program in July 2004. The county approached this as a major effort and obtained government and foundation grants to help begin the program. They engaged a consultant, Judi Knittel, with experience as a child welfare professional as well as an adoptive parent, as the full-time coordinator. The partners were initially engaged as contract employees on an hourly basis with no benefits. Over time, the program expanded and became more systematized. The county contracted with the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Contra Costa (CAPC) which in turn is the “official” employer of the Parent Partners on a full-time basis with work benefits including retirement, sick and vacation time. Ms. Knittel works for CAPC and leads the program, providing remarkable continuity. The program currently has five full-time partners. As part of the program, CAPC employs three Early Intervention Outreach Specialists (EIOS) who are experts in alcohol and other drug abuse and treatment and work hand-in-hand with the PP Program. The program is currently expanding to nine partners who will be co-located alongside social workers in each of the Contra Costa County’s Children & Family Service offices. A manager from Child Welfare, Kathy Marsh, oversees the contract with

CAPC to help assure continuous communication between and coordination of services and delivery. CAPC seldom makes a decision on its PP/EIOS practices without approval from the county, even though CAPC is the employer.

How the Program Works

Ms. Knittel reviews every Detention Hearing court petition and assigns selected cases to a parent partner who attends the hearing. Contra Costa Juvenile Dependency Court is very supportive of this program and partners are generally introduced to the family in the courtroom. Based on the details of each case, Ms. Knittel assigns a partner with similar experience. Fathers, for example, generally like working with a male partner or a young mother may benefit from a female partner who had herself been a young parent. The family can refuse the service or request it later down the road and may request a different partner. This is to give them some control, as they do not have any say in their assigned social worker. The program does not participate in cases involving sexual abuse, high profile, severe abuse, and terminated guardianships. The PP program sometimes works with families who are receiving voluntary services from Child Welfare and are supported in the same way as families who receive court-ordered services.

A key feature of the program in all cases is that partners are available around the clock to the families they serve, even though they are not required to do so. They support families in the evenings and on weekends and holidays: when most case-carrying social workers are off-duty.

Once a case is open, the program does not close the case; after the family has reunified, their reliance on partners reduces and over time the relationship comes to a conclusion. Occasionally, a family may reach back out to a partner and if possible, assistance is provided but not at the same level of involvement as before. It resembles a consultation type of a relationship.

A new parent partner receives weekly individual supervision from Ms. Knittel and is assigned an experienced partner for mentorship. The experienced parent partners receive supervision every two weeks. Partners meet as a group once a month for 4 hours, for team-building and support as well as addressing and airing out issues. When the program began, it faced some resistance from experienced agency social workers, who did not want interference in their cases from parent partners until they came to understand their contribution to the families. Over time and experience with the program, and arrival of new social workers, this is no longer a barrier.

Earlier Evaluations

While there are no recently published studies, the three studies from 2009 through 2012 available online were promising and positive. The first, published in July 2009 by a team at the Center for Social Services Research School of Social Welfare at U.C. Berkeley, found that clients were highly satisfied with the services provided by their Parent Partners, especially in three areas: shared experience, communication, and support. The study found that partners themselves benefited from the role and that county staff valued the program for the benefits to the clients.

The study showed that “60% of the children with a Parent Partner reunified with their parents within 12 months of removal, compared to 26% of children whose parents were not served” by Parent Partners.

The second study published in the *Journal of Family Strengths (2011)*, found that “parents utilizing the services of a Parent Partner were four times more likely to reunify with their children compared to a matched sample of parents who were served in the county prior to the program’s implementation.”

The last study, from December 2012, also published in *Journal of Family Strengths*, found similar benefits. The study focused on differences in how various stakeholders view the Parent Partner Program. “While all stakeholders agree that the program is beneficial and worthwhile, there are subtle differences in their opinions about what is most effective.” Partners emphasized their advocacy as their most important function while recipient families stressed the social and emotional support they received. Community stakeholders and agency members recognized the “importance of the helping relationships for families in the system, while also recognizing the larger role that the Parent Partner (Mentoring) Program played in supporting family engagement at the agency level.”

Program Approach and Benefits

What stands out is that the Contra Costa Parent Partners Program has the grassroots, non-

corporate feel of an operation that has developed from the bottom up. It has grown over the years yet stayed true to its mission. The program philosophy is “We choose to believe that parents behave badly because nobody has ever told them how to behave properly.” It is a respectful way of parenting the parent and meeting them where they are. There is strong teamwork among the partners as well as individual client work. Partners hold themselves accountable and let parents know that they have a choice and partners can help them to understand accountability. They make it known that the team of PP is not problem-free, but rather that there is room for openness and trust which promotes learning. This creates further personal and group growth that leads to personal satisfaction and better outcomes for all. The clear dedication and commitment of the partners is evident and crucial to the program’s success.

The key benefits observed include the following:

Table 1. Benefits of Parent Partner Program

Beneficiary	Benefit	Why
Parent Clients (Families receiving services)	Emotional, material, drug abuse and treatment support, mutual understanding and guidance	The Parent Partner has “been there, done that.” The partner is also familiar with community and county resources
	Role modeling and development of self- reliance	From what to wear to court to how to get along with a social worker to how to handle a conflict like an adult
	Physical presence of a supportive partner	At court hearings, TDM meetings, etc.

	Prevention of children entering foster care	Finding solutions at the initial meeting that can avoid foster care
	Empowerment by learning of their rights and responsibilities to better understanding of how child welfare works	Becoming an educated consumer and self-advocacy
	Father engagement (whereas most child welfare efforts only engage mothers)	Parent Partners focus on engaging fathers (as well as mothers)
	Better outcomes for children and families as measured by sooner and higher reunification rates	Active support, role modeling and advocacy by Parent Parents
Social Workers	Workload relief	Parent Partners work closely with clients as a life skills coach, and have more frequent contact
Agency	Workload relief for social workers	Social workers have more time for other job duties
	Support a program with positive impact on child welfare	Help current clients and engage and employ former recipients
	Clear measures of success	Sooner and higher reunification rates
	Prevention of children entering foster care	Finding solutions at the initial meeting
Parent Partners	Giving back to the system, personal redemption	Being a part of the solution
	Significant role	Assist agency in engaging families in the child welfare process and serve as “parent’s voice”
	Employment with benefits	Rewarding work
	Support by supervisor and team	Continue to work on personal and professional growth and awareness

Implications for San Mateo County and Recommendations

Approximately three years ago San Mateo County made a modest commitment toward the

design and implementation of an in-house, non-full-time Parent Mentor Program. The program is currently inactive and is being reassigned within Children and Family Services as a part of the Katie A. Settlement “Pathways to Well-Being Program,” which encourages peer parent advocates to be apart of the Child and Family Team meetings.

In deciding how to utilize peer parents under the settlement, San Mateo County can look to Contra Costa County as a highly successful model. Contra Costa’s success, however, is not isolated. Similar results are being achieved in other Bay Area counties. Alameda and San Francisco Counties have been contracting with Better Way, incorporated under its Parent Engagement Program with full-time Parent Advocates.

San Mateo County would benefit from an active program with full-time parent partners. Such a program can radiate hope and success for recipient families, agency staff and the community.

The following recommendations are key elements for such a program to be successful.

- The engagement of a non-profit agency that would employ, train and manage full-time parent partners. This could either be a local non-profit agency or a regional non-profit who is already serving other counties.
- Systematically integrating the work of such parent partners with that of county social workers for client families in each of the three regions of the county.

- Agency management to design a budgetary model, including Title IV-E to cover the costs, based on a specific size program -- incorporating at least one full-time parent partner for each of the three regions of the county and a supervisor. Scaling from the costs of the Contra Costa County example, the annual cost is likely to range between \$300,000 and \$350,000.
- A clear message from the leadership team “We are going to do this.... Not just try.” This is crucial for implementation to succeed and especially for social workers, their supervisors and managers throughout the county to be positively motivated to work actively with the parent partners on an ongoing basis.
- The assignment of a child welfare supervisor who is: (a) highly committed to the parent partner approach and the value it can offer families, social workers and the agency, and (b) for whom the development and implementation of this program would be the primary responsibility of his or her time.

By putting these elements in place, San Mateo County can successfully make Parent Partners an integral and effective part of its assistance to children and families.

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5. Jean Milam - Better Ways, Inc. – Parent Advocacy materials on line

APPENDIX

Comparison of Programs

Feature	Contra Costa County	Alameda County
Organization	Child Abuse Prevention Council of Contra Costa County (CAPC)	Better Way Inc.
Initial	County managed	County managed with hiring assistance from Chobart College
Program Name	Parent Partners	Parent Engagement Program
Current	CAPC	Better Way Inc.
Reason for Change	Better management and benefits to Parent Partners employees	Better management
Recruitment & Selection	1. Referrals from current social workers	1. Referrals from current social workers 2. Parent advocate support groups to current or past clients
Role	One on one casework, TDM, Icebreaker meetings between parents and foster parents, trainings for parents and professionals, fatherhood engagement, act as “parent’s voice” in committees and workgroups.	One on one case work, TDM, CHAT (Communicating History and Transitions) meetings between parents and foster parents, Parent Orientation Courses, The Fatherhood Circle, act as “parent’s voice” in committees and workgroups.
Duration	Once open, never closes Family identifies three support systems	Six months to one year
When Involved	At Detention Court hearings	First contact via Assessment Center phone call to parent and When parent requests

Employment	Employees with benefits Weekly or biweekly supervision Monthly group supervision	Employees with benefits Free therapy to employees Two program supervisors
Results	Supported families, earlier reunification, supports social workers and Parent Partners	Supported families, earlier reunification, supports social workers and Parent Advocates
Keys to Success	Clear job duties, support of Parent Partners with consistent supervision and accountability.	Clear job duties, support of Parent Advocates with consistent supervision and accountability.
Agencies	CAPC is a local nonprofit in Contra Costa County	Better Way, Inc. is a nonprofit that serves counties in bay area