

The Parent Partner Program: **A Study of Parents as Mentors and Advocates in the Child Welfare System in Contra Costa County**

AMY KAISER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Parent Partner Program is a mentoring program in Contra Costa County designed to connect parents who are trying to navigate the Child Welfare System with parents who have successfully navigated the system in the past.

The Parent Partner Program is a voluntary program. Parents determine when and to what degree they want partners to be involved with their case. Parent Partners are put through extensive training and work closely with both social workers and the Program Coordinator. Parent Partners work with Family Reunification cases except for the severe abuse and neglect cases.

Successes

Since it began in 2005, the Parent Partner's have partnered with 85% of parents from family reunification cases that were appropriate. There are two full-time Parent Partners each with the skill and ability to mentor anywhere from eighteen to twenty parents at a time. In addition, the program has recently hired more part-time partners for a total of eleven. Contra Costa expects a countywide rollout of the program in the summer of 2006.

Recommendations

As San Mateo County prepares for a countywide rollout of Differential Response, it is positioned to start looking at other programs that can contribute to overall system improvements. In the summer of 2006, UC Berkeley will be releasing its evaluation of the Parent Partner Program. This evaluation should be the first step in San Mateo County's analysis of how the parent mentoring model can be implemented. Since Contra Costa first developed the Parent Partner Program, other parent-focused programs have emerged, and it would be beneficial to assess these programs as well. Working with stakeholders early and often in the research and design of the program will contribute to the success of the program and aid in garnering ongoing support and funding.

Amy Kaiser is the Information Technology Manager with the County of San Mateo Human Services Agency.

The Parent Partner Program: **A Study of Parents as Mentors and Advocates in the Child Welfare System in Contra Costa County**

AMY KAISER

Background

For the past couple of years, San Mateo County has focused greater attention on the child welfare system due in large part to the emphasis on the System Improvement Plan (SIP). As the Information Technology Manager for San Mateo County Human Services Agency, I have had the opportunity to be involved in many pieces of the County's system improvement planning and in child welfare in general. My involvement includes development of monthly AB636 and Team Decision Making reports, the implementation of a Comprehensive Assessment Tool (CAT), and the development of a web-based system to track families referred to our community partners as a part of Differential Response.

I have observed that through all of these efforts our rate of reunification has increased 61.8% to 78.2%. Yet, San Mateo County is still just barely over the Federal Standard of 76.2% and it could possibly have reached a plateau.¹ Even if the county were able to further increase its reunification rates it would risk increasing recidivism rates as well due to reunifying too quickly before families are really ready.

With all of this in mind, I started looking at programs in other counties that would focus heavily on strengthening families and that would be a complement to current efforts. In my search for new programs, I found one program focused on strengthen-

ing families that targets birth parents and is called the Parent Partner Program in Contra Costa County.

History

In October 2003, Contra Costa County was awarded a Family-to-Family System of Care grant. The grant enabled Contra Costa County to further existing efforts in child welfare and to develop the Parent Partner Program for peer mentoring of parents involved in the system. Contra Costa was also interested in improving reunification rates as their rate at 71.9% was slightly below the Federal Standard. The county saw this grant and the Parent Partner Program as an opportunity to get children back home with their birth parents sooner and with a more stable environment.² The Parent Partner Program would also help to ensure that children did not return to the child welfare system. The System of Care grant afforded Contra Costa the opportunity to take a more holistic approach to child welfare.

Program Definition

The Parent Partner Program was developed as a part of Contra Costa's System of Care approach to help support families involved in the child welfare system. It provides information, support and guidance to parents as they navigate the child welfare system. It was not designed to "fix" families, but as the mission states, support them and help them draw on resources both within their own families and communities, and from the agency with the ultimate goal of facilitating permanence for the children. The Parent Partner Program strives to link families entering the

¹Needell, B., Webster, D., Armijo, M., Lee, S., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Shaw, T., Dawson, W., Piccus, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Conley, A., Smith, J., Dunn, A., Frerer, K., & Putnam Hornstein, E., (2006). *Child Welfare Services Reports for California*. Retrieved [April 21, 2006], from University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research website. URL: <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/>; Children reunified in < or = to 12 months between July 2003-June 2004 and July 2004-June 2005

²See Note 1.

child welfare system with a parent who has successfully navigated the system. The Parent Partner's role is both as an advocate and as a leader. Their goal is to help families develop supportive relationships and to offer the knowledge and experience they have gained after having gone through the child welfare system.

Research

To develop the Parent Partner Program, Contra Costa employed both a Grant Coordinator and Program Coordinator to work together to design and develop a program that would best meet the needs of the families that they serve. Before designing the actual Parent Partner Program, the Coordinators studied programs such as St Christopher's in New York and examined parent advocacy programs and mentoring programs for best practices. Additionally, they reviewed the available research about programs akin to the Parent Partner Program. The coordinators held focus groups in the community and worked closely with stakeholders in both the development and the design of the program. Contra Costa also conducted a self-assessment as part of the preparation for this program and made sure to include parents in this process as well. The program was designed to focus on the needs of the families in their community and to complement the existing services and initiatives already in place.

The Program

The program targets Family Reunification cases. In most cases, the Parent Partner is informed of the case at the time the petition is filed so that staff members can introduce themselves to the parent at the first hearing and offer their services.

The Parent Partner Program is voluntary and the parents lead and control the level to which a Parent Partner is involved with their case. All situations where a Parent Partner accompanies or assists a parent is at the request of the parent. All conversations the parents have with the Parent Partners are completely confidential. The Parent Partners have the authority to attend court sessions, Team Decision Making meetings, or provide guidance and sup-

port at any other function the parent invites them. It is important to note that Parent Partners are not used for severe cases such as sexual abuse cases. Most of the cases that Parent Partners are involved in are drug and/or alcohol-related cases.

There are currently two full-time and eleven part-time Parent Partners employed by Contra Costa County. The Parent Partners report directly to the Program Coordinator and are employed by the county as contractors. The full-time Parent Partners help approximately eighteen to twenty parents at a time. The part-time partners help one to five parents depending on their availability. From the perspective of the Parent Partner, it appears that the families find immense comfort in someone just sitting and being present with them as they try to navigate the system. The parents are able to relate to the Parent Partners and feel comfortable asking questions without the feelings often associated when encountering social workers or other authorities.

The two full-time Parent Partners were hired in March 2005 and began seeing parents shortly after coming on board. Since then Contra Costa has identified seventy-six families that were deemed appropriate for a Parent Partner to approach. Of the seventy-six families, more than 85 percent were engaged and mentored. As for the parents who were not engaged, it was either because they were not able to be located, they moved out of the county, or they refused services.³ It is important to note, however, that if a parent changes their mind and decides they want a mentor they will not be turned away. Parents are partnered for as long as they want to be or feel they need to be. The level of partnering differs for each parent—for some it just means an occasional phone call.

In addition to the relationships they form with the families, the partners form strong ties with the county social workers as well—serving often as experts in understanding the parents they serve. All the conversations that the Parent Partners have with the social workers are confidential and information is only

³Data provided by Judi Knittel, Parent Partner Program Coordinator for Contra Costa County.

passed in one direction—from the social worker to the Parent Partner.

Training

The program uses the recommendations of child welfare social workers to determine whom to invite to an orientation about the Parent Partner Program. Parents are invited to an orientation as the first step in developing them as partners. At the orientation, parents learn about the role of a Parent Partner as both an advocate and a leader. They are also introduced to the extensive Parent Partner training program. Those parents who decide to become Parent Partners go through an extensive interview process followed by a training program that spans four to five months.

The training program covers (but is not limited to) the following areas:

- Overview of child abuse and neglect and the child welfare system mandated reporting
- Strengths-based family engagement
- Building a better future
- Team decision-making
- Presentation skills
- Establishing effective boundaries
- Mentoring

As a part of ongoing training and support, the Parent Partner's meet weekly in both group and one-on-one settings with the Program Coordinator. These sessions are used for general "check-in" and to discuss any issues they or their client families might be facing. Social workers are also provided an orientation about the program and receive training on how to work with Parent Partners.

Next Steps: Contra Costa County

By the summer of 2006, Contra Costa County expects a county-wide rollout of the Parent Partner Program, growing from the pilot in Central County to include both East and West County as well. The long-term goal is to have Parent Partners from all of the communities the agency serves. Contra Costa also plans to expand the role of the Parent Partners

and include them in all Team Decision Making meetings to ensure the parent's perspective is always represented.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

The University of California at Berkeley UC Berkeley will be performing an external audit of the Parent Partner Program due out in the summer of 2006. As a part of this evaluation, UC Berkeley will be conducting a survey of the parents who were partnered. Some areas included in the evaluation are the impact of having the Parent Partners involved at the first point of engagement, the role of having the Parent Partners in Team Decision-Making meetings, and the impact that the program has had on reunification rates.

Contra Costa has also been able to see the impact that the program has had in identifying additional areas in the child welfare system where systematic changes need to take place. Having a partner walk side-by-side through the system with families has had the unique benefit of bringing to light other aspects of the child welfare system that needed attention. Contra Costa County believes that an openness and willingness to change has further highlighted the success of the Parent Partner Program in its ability to not only serve a formerly underserved population but also allowing for even greater system improvements.

SUSTAINABILITY

A concern when developing a program with grant funding is having the ability to sustain the funding after the grant expires. The System of Care grant funding will last through 2008. However, Contra Costa County has countywide support to explore other avenues for funding so this program can grow and continue beyond 2008. The Parent Partner Program owes a large part of its success and continued support to having stakeholders involved early and because they have maintained involvement stakeholder involvement will help to ensure that funding for this program is made a priority.

Implications: San Mateo County

As mentioned earlier, San Mateo County is reunifying families at a rate just above the Federal Standard. The Parent Partner Program helps to de-mystify the child welfare system for parents and helps them to understand what they need to do achieve reunification. The Parent Partner Program can add a layer of insurance to the reunification as well in that it will hopefully reduce the likelihood that the family will re-enter the system.

San Mateo County has not yet moved in the direction of working with birth parents. The Parent Partner program would be one prospect to filling this void. San Mateo County has established priorities to strengthen placement decisions by leveraging a team-based model, to build relationships with new and prospective foster parents, to leverage the community to keep at-risk families out of the system. The Parent Partner Program would add supporting birth parents to that list of priorities. In addition, it appears that the Casey Foundation has recommended that the Parent Partner Program be implemented statewide or at least for all Family-to-Family counties. It would be characteristic of San Mateo County to be involved in a pilot program and to assist in shaping the program for the rest of California.

NEXT STEPS

The Parent Partner Program evaluation is due from UC Berkeley in the summer of 2006. A first step for San Mateo County would be to review the findings of the evaluation and incorporate the findings into the program design for San Mateo County. After reviewing the findings from UC Berkeley, San Mateo County should begin working with stakeholders, including social workers, parents and other members of the community to gauge interest and gain support. Contra Costa attributes much of its ongoing success to the fact that the stakeholders were involved in every step of the design and implementation.

San Mateo County would need to allocate from six months up to a year for the planning and design of the program and another 6 months to one year to move into a pilot implementation. Contra Costa did

not rush the pace of the program design or implementation and attributes this in-part to their success. Contra Costa County spent a year's time developing the infrastructure for the program including the development of an intensive training program for the Parent Partners.

San Mateo County could look to The Casey Foundation to fund a pilot program, try leveraging additional funds from the SIP budget, or look to community organizations or foundations who might support the program. Contra Costa allocates \$150,000 of their System of Care grant each year to support the Parent Partner Program and have yet to spend the entire allocation.

The money supports the salaries of two full-time partners, eleven part-time partners, the coordinator salary and training costs. The allocation also covers other administrative costs such as a part of the Grant Coordinator's time and the cost of the evaluation. San Mateo could look to lowering that cost by finding in-house staff that could coordinate the program and manage the grant if that were applicable.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to Neely McElroy and Judi Knittel for taking the time out of their very busy schedules to provide me with an in-depth understanding of the Parent Partner Program. And a special thanks to Sy and Cheryl, the two permanent parent partners in Contra Costa, for candidly sharing their opinions and experiences with me. I would also like to give a special thanks to John Joy and Clarisa Soriano for believing in me and supporting me through every step of the BASSC program. And last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the BSG staff for providing me the time and space to dedicate myself to the program.