

*The Parent Partner Program*  
**A Study of Contra Costa County's Parent Mentoring Model  
as a Strategy for Welfare to Work**

EMILY BALLI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**History**

Santa Cruz County has put great effort into improving its work participation rate (WPR) for CalWORKS from 22% in FFY 2008 to 33% for FFY 2010. Proposed changes to the CalWORKS program such as the reduction of time on aid from 60 to 48 months, grant reductions of 8%, and a change to the earned income disregard will make maintaining and improving WPR's a challenge. The county will need to identify new strategies to promote engagement among new clients as well as among non-compliant and sanctioned clients. Contra Costa County has utilized a mentoring approach, through the Parent Partner Program, to assist parents in navigating the child welfare system. Since mentoring programs have proven to be successful in both the private and public sector, I wanted to determine if the Parent Partner Program could be replicated in Santa Cruz County as a strategy to improve engagement in Welfare to Work (WTW).

**Recommendations**

Parent Partners in the child welfare program model behaviors and skills for parents such as how to dress for court, how to handle conflict using an adult attitude, and how to organize their appointments. These are many of the same skills that are needed to be successful in the WTW program and in the world of employment. Contra Costa took a strategic and thoughtful approach to the development and implementation of the Parent Partner Program that has allowed the program to be successful. Santa Cruz County could include the development and implementation of a Parent Partner Program for WTW as part of its FY 2010–2013 Strategic Plan as an approach to “Linking Services Seamlessly.”

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**Emily Balli, Program Manager,**  
Employment and Benefit Services Division,  
Santa Cruz County Human Services Department



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## **A Study of Contra Costa County's Parent Mentoring Model as a Strategy for Welfare to Work**

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### **Background**

Counties throughout California are looking for new strategies to improve their CalWORKS work participation rate (WPR) to avoid fiscal penalties that may be imposed if the state does not meet its WPR. Through focused efforts, Santa Cruz County improved its WPR from 22% in FFY 2008 to 33% for FFY 2010. For FFY 2011, the county's WPR is 37%. The proposed changes to CalWORKS for FFY 2011-12, (which include the reduction of time on aid from 60 to 48 months, grant reductions of 8%, and a change to the earned income disregard), will pose challenges for Santa Cruz County as it seeks to maintain and improve its WPR. The county will need to employ new strategies that promote early and full engagement in Welfare to Work (WTW), and it will need to find ways to reengage sanctioned and non-compliant participants.

Mentoring programs have proven to be successful in both the private and public sector. Contra Costa County has utilized a mentoring approach, through the Parent Partner Program, to assist parents in navigating the child welfare system. This case study will focus on the Parent Partner Program to determine if the Parent Partner mentoring model could be replicated in Santa Cruz County as a strategy to improve engagement in CalWORKS WTW and to increase its WPR.

### **History**

Funded through a System of Care grant awarded in 2003, Contra Costa implemented its Parent Partner Program in mid-2005. The focus of the grant was to improve placement stability and permanency out-

comes for children and youth, and the grant was modeled after system of care grants used in substance abuse and mental health services. A central theme of the grant was to include families in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the system of care. Contra Costa County's administrators recognized the value of bringing the parent voice to the table and were able to be very thoughtful and strategic in developing their program design. Given the primary purpose of the initial grant was to develop infrastructure rather than provide direct services, the county hired a Program Coordinator who had worked in child welfare services to assist in the development and implementation of the program. In meetings with Program Coordinator, Judi Knittel and Division Manager Neely McElroy, both stated that the initial planning that was done was critical to the success of the program.

### **Program Design**

Within the Parent Partner Program, Parent Partners fulfill 3 roles:

- Parent advocates/mentors for parents currently involved in the child welfare system,
- Leadership and parent voice as participants on various workgroups and committees, and
- Parent trainers who provide training to parents and various professional and non-professional groups.

The Parent Partner Program targets families at the beginning of their involvement with child welfare services. In their role as parent advocates/mentors, Parent Partners are notified of cases when petitions are filed and offer services to parents at their

first court hearing. The program is voluntary, and parents determine if, and when, they want to work with a Parent Partner. Parent Partners are defined as “life-trained paraprofessionals who have successfully negotiated the child welfare system”. Whereas parents may be apprehensive asking questions to a social worker, Parent Partners are a less threatening connection to the child welfare system. They also provide the hope that families need by providing real life examples of parents who have been successful at reuniting with their children. Parent Partners can model the behaviors that allowed them to be successful in their own interactions with the child welfare system.

In their role as parent leaders, Parent Partners participate in various workgroups and committees and bring parent input and perspective to the discussion. Contra Costa County developed a Professional Development Plan for their Parent Partners, which includes presentation skills and establishing effective boundaries, to prepare them to meet professional expectations in the workplace. Parent Partners have impacted how the department conducts its business: they have had brought to light issues that may not have otherwise surfaced, and they have provided the catalyst to do some things differently.

In their role as parent trainers, the Parent Partners provide training to parents and participate in training for new foster parents and CASA advocates. They are able to put a face to the parents that are going through the child welfare system and demonstrate to other parents that they can become as successful as the Parent Partners are.

Some of the things that Parent Partners do not do include:

- Supervising visits
- Transporting people
- Taking sides
- Testifying in court
- Translating
- Acting as case workers, counselors, attorneys, or sponsors
- Taking referrals from attorneys or social workers—the program is voluntary.

## Parent Partner Program Research

Judi Knittel stated that success for the Parent Partner Program is defined as an “informed consumer”. A July 2009 UC Berkeley study of Contra Costa County’s Parent Partner Program found that responses via survey indicated that parents were highly satisfied with the services they received, and they felt that they were supported and informed about their experience with the child welfare agency.<sup>1</sup> Parents also indicated that they felt empowered to take control of their circumstances and make needed changes in their lives. Results from the outcome study showed that reunification was more likely when Parent Partners served parents. Within the same study, client focus group responses were clustered into three areas of importance: the value of shared experiences, communication and support. Since these areas seemed to be the most important to parents, they would also be considered focus areas when looking to replicate the Parent Partner Program in WTW.

Earlier research found that programs with peer support have larger positive effects on parental attitudes and knowledge compared to those without peer support.<sup>2</sup> In the study, *Closer to Home: Parent Mentors in Child Welfare*<sup>3</sup> it was found that individuals exposed to stress, the result of sudden life events (e.g. the removal of a child) or chronic strains (e.g., persistent poverty, unemployment or illness), become overwhelmed in their ability to adjust. Other people are needed to supply alternative coping skills or to participate directly in the individual’s effort to cope. The same study also quoted other research stating that programs that also address concrete needs, such as housing assistance, transportation and childcare, are more successful than other types of family sup-

<sup>1</sup> Anthony E., Duerr Berrick, J., Cohen, E., Wilder, E., (July 2009). *Partnering with Parents Promising Approaches to Improve Reunification Outcomes for Children in Foster Care*. Center for Social Services Research, School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley.

<sup>2</sup> Layzer, J.I., Goodson B.D., Bernstein, L., & Price, C. (2001). *National evaluation of family support programs: Final report, volume A: The meta-analysis*. Cambridge, MA: ABT Associates.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, E., Canan, L. (2006) Child Welfare; Sept/Oct 2006. *Closer to Home: Parent Mentors in Child Welfare*.

port programs.<sup>4</sup> This research reinforces the idea of implementing Parent Partners in WTW as supportive services can be accessed through the WTW program.

### **Why the Parent Partner Program for Santa Cruz County WTW?**

Santa Cruz County has made strides in improving its WPR over the last 2 years. Proposed changes to the CalWORKS program outlined in ACL's 11-29, 11-33, 11-34, and 11-36 will require looking into new ways to engage parents in activities that will lead to employment. The proposals to reduce grant amounts by 8% and change the earned income disregard, will result in some parents who are currently meeting eligibility requirements to be taken off of aid. Rather than finding "new" ways to conduct business, it would be wise to look at successful programs that can be replicated in WTW, such as the Parent Partner Program.

In Contra Costa County, Parent Partners help parents understand and exhibit appropriate social behavior, such as how to handle conflict with an adult attitude, how to dress for court, and how to represent themselves appropriately at a meeting with their attorney, social worker or foster parent. These are many of the same skills and behaviors that are needed to be successful in the WTW program, as well as in the world of employment. Parent Partners also help parents with life skills, such as organizing their appointments and calling when they are unable to make an appointment or do something that is required. Parent Partners have credibility with the parents they work with because of their shared experiences. Employment and Training Specialists staff, just as child welfare social workers, do not necessarily have this connection with parents because they may have different experiences or perceived differences, and they have an authority role within the relationship.

Successful clients who can partner with clients who are new to the system or who are struggling

with participation requirements can provide credible information and advice because they have been there and have shown that they can be successful. Sometimes parents who are in non-compliance or sanction statuses need a real-life example of how to re-engage and move back into compliance. As Judy Knittel mentioned, success in the Parent Partner Program is the "informed consumer." The more informed someone is the better decisions they will make.

Another area where mentoring would be beneficial is with "Crossover Cases", families who are involved with Child Welfare and CalWORKS WTW. Mentoring would help parents navigate and coordinate two programs and case plans that can, at times, be at cross-purposes. Parents are often confused by the activities of each case plan and sometimes only do part of the activities of each, which means they are not fully complying with either plan. A mentor could help parents effectively communicate and advocate for those activities that would best benefit their family and situation. Crossover families are in a stressful situation both emotionally and financially. A mentor could also assist parents in advocating for the supportive services that they need to be able to fully engage in case planning activities. Often, the activities recommended to help parents be successful with their children are also the activities that will help them be successful in WTW (e.g., substance abuse treatment, domestic violence services). The goal of Crossover is to help parents and staff coordinate plans and integrate services to the greatest extent possible. Parent Partners for Crossover cases would benefit both Family and Children's Services and the Employment and Benefit Services Division as parents would be more informed and thus, more likely to engage in the activities that benefit their families.

While further research is warranted, it seems that the Parent Partner Program is a promising best practice in child welfare, and it is improving reunification outcomes for families. It can be expected that implementation of a similar mentoring program in Welfare to Work would result in improved outcomes as well.

<sup>4</sup> Chaffin, M., Bonner, B. L., & Hill, R.F. (2001). Family Preservation and family support programs: Child maltreatment outcomes across client risk levels and program types. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 25, 1269-1289.

## Next Steps

While meeting with those involved in the implementation of the Parent Partner Program, they spoke of their lessons learned and some challenges to be prepared for:

- Expect to hear negative things about your system
- Set up your values from the beginning
- Bring in staff from the beginning and let them know that their ideas are incorporated into the model
- Know that implementing the program in-house is the fastest way to shift the culture

Santa Cruz County could include the development and implementation of a Parent Partner Program for WTW as part of its FY 2010–2013 Strategic Plan as an approach to the strategic response of “Linking Services Seamlessly”. A workgroup consisting of partners and staff could be convened to identify the criteria for selecting Parent Partners, developing the job description, and identifying the training needs for Parent Partners. This workgroup could also be tasked with looking at the current WTW offerings and assessing the impact of proposed CalWORKS changes for FY 11/12 outlined in ACL’s 11-29, 11-33, 11-34 and 11-36.<sup>5</sup> This workgroup could also determine if the best oversight of the program, would be in-house or through the existing subsidized employment contractor.

Currently, Santa Cruz County contracts with Exemplar to produce engagement reports for WTW. These reports show the number of CalWORKS adults engaged in activities, as well as those who are in other statuses, such as exemption, non-compliance and sanction. These reports could be used to identify program improvement areas and the target participants for a mentoring program. The longitudinal

study capacity of these reports could also be used to measure the outcomes of a mentoring program by showing the change in engagement over time of those targeted for mentoring.

Although there are many benefits to having a mentoring program such as the Parent Partner Program, there are some definite challenges as well, including finding funding to pay Parent Partner salaries. For WTW, Santa Cruz County could look into using AB98 subsidized employment funding for wages. The county can also work with the local Community College (Cabrillo College) to look at work study placements if Parent Partners are enrolled in the Human Services Credential Program. Effective March 24, 2011, SB72 expanded eligibility for AB98 wage subsidies, increased the duration of qualifying job placements, and increased the maximum amount of AB98 funding that CDSS will provide counties beyond the single allocation. ACL 11-32<sup>6</sup> outlines these changes, including the expansion that allows AB98 funding for adults who have exceeded CalWORKS time limits.

Many families that are involved with Child Welfare are also involved in WTW; as a result, it would make sense that a model that works with these parents in one area would also yield results in another area. Contra Costa’s strategic and thoughtful approach to developing the Parent Partner Program and its commitment to its success at all levels has led to the sustainability of the program and its distinction as a best practice. Often we see that programs or models fail not because they were bad ideas, but because the process of implementation was flawed. The strategic approach taken by Contra Costa County from the beginning of the project really made the difference in implementing the program in a way that lent itself to success.

<sup>5</sup> CDSS All County Letters 11-29, 11-33, 11-34, 11-36. <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/lettersnotices/P62438.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> CDSS All County Letters 11-32. <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/lettersnotices/P62438.htm>.

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