

# An Evaluation of Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program: Why it Works

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## Introduction

Many child welfare agencies are changing the way they do business as a result of new legislation, mandates and an overall shift in thinking. The focus is on improving outcomes for families involved in the child welfare system. Solano County is no different than its counterparts in wanting to improve services to families. However, with dwindling resources, counties must not only be innovative, but must also assess what is working for other agencies and attempt to model their successes.

Child welfare agencies throughout the country are currently participating in many best practice programs, such as Team Decision Making, Family Meetings, and Permanency Groups, all in the hope of improving outcomes for the families being served. These programs are specifically designed to assist families in improving their outcomes and keeping children safe. Agencies of varying sizes and resources are all participating in these programs and many have seen improved results.

Nine years ago, Contra Costa County embarked on a journey to start a program to assist families in the child welfare system. The intent of Contra Costa County was to improve family engagement and reduce recidivism. The program Contra Costa County launched was a relatively new program called Parent Partners. The Parent Partner program has been extremely successful in returning children to their parent's care and engaging families early on in the court process. The data suggest that children whose parents were involved in the Parent Partner program were more likely to reunify by 18 months

than children whose parents were not involved in the Parent Partner program.<sup>1</sup>

Approximately two years ago, Solano County attempted to launch a similar program, called Parent Mentors. Unfortunately, this program is now in a holding pattern due to limited resources.

During these times of extreme budget cuts and lean fiscal times, child welfare agencies must be creative when it comes to engaging families. Services should be geared to engage families early and must be effective to ensure children are safe in their homes and do not linger in foster care. Solano County has lost most of its support staff, and the agency has been placed in the position to provide more services to families with less staff. In circumstances like these, agencies are forced to think outside of the box and must be strategic about service planning. This case study will examine Contra Costa County's successful Parent Partner program and how it might be successfully implemented into a smaller county like Solano.

## Program History

The Parent Partner program was implemented with a grant from the federal Administration for Children and Families System of Care entitled Partnering for Permanence.<sup>2</sup> The central goal for Contra Costa County was to develop strategies to better support families in their efforts to remain together safely, or to reunify when safe and appropriate.<sup>1</sup>

After much planning and research, the Parent Partner program officially launched in 2005, staffed by a Parent Partner coordinator and a supervisor to

provide support for the new Parent Partners. Initially there were ten Parent Partners hired to assist parent clients. The program focused on first time removals and was strictly voluntary. Child welfare clients were offered a mentor, but mentors were not mandatory and social workers could not make parent client referrals as part of case planning services. The latter requirement was put in place to ensure voluntary participation.

The Building a Better Future curriculum developed by the Ann E. Casey Foundation was followed. The curriculum was a two-day, five module training focusing on the following subjects: Orientation and Introduction, Grief and Loss, Communication Skills, Self-Advocacy, and Partnering with Professionals.<sup>3</sup> The agency also provides trainings on establishing effective boundaries, Team Decision Making readiness, family engagement, court, and presentation skills.

### **Key Elements of the Program**

The Parent Partner program is a unique and insightful program developed to assist parent clients with navigating the child welfare system. The program is different from any other as it strives to enlist as staff successful mothers and fathers who have experienced child removal, services, and reunification. The program is designed to engage parents from the very beginning of their dependency case, the detention hearing. The principal goal of the Parent Partner program is to help parent clients gain awareness of their rights and responsibilities, and to assist parents toward reunification with their children.<sup>1</sup>

Parent Partners are selected because of the successes they have experienced in overcoming significant obstacles, changing patterns of personal behavior that diminished their parenting skills, and by acknowledging the role of child welfare in motivating them to re-prioritize their family. They are viewed as important allies in the Contra Costa County Child and Family Service Division.<sup>1</sup> Several guidelines were put in place to ensure full client participation and engagement. Parent Partners do not take case notes, cannot be called to testify in

court, do not report to the social worker, and are not case assistants. There had to be complete buy-in from the agency, as well as its partners for this program to be successful. Educating the agency staff, court and community partners was essential to sustaining success.

Focus groups were held in an effort to get a better idea of what the community needed and a series of meet and greets between agency staff and Parent Partners were arranged to educate both populations. Social workers nominated past successful clients to serve as potential Parent Partners.

Focus groups with parent clients suggested that Parent Partner services were not only viewed as beneficial, but also necessary. Parent clients' responses clustered into three main areas of importance: the value of shared experiences, communication, and support. Parent clients saw Parent Partners as people they could relate to, who were supportive, and served as their advocates. The Parent Partners provided hope to new families entering the dependency system. Parent clients believed they too would be successful in reuniting with their children.<sup>1</sup>

Supervising the Parent Partners is an essential component in order to maintain an effective program. Contra Costa County's Parent Partner program supervisor has experience working as a social worker in the community, county and state level. The supervisor assists the Parent Partners with processing difficult and sensitive information, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and taking care of themselves. The supervisor holds monthly group meetings and meets with each Parent Partner weekly for individual supervision. During the group meetings the Parent Partner team problem-solves issues, presents cases, develops programs, and participates in team-building exercises.

The Parent Partner team initially began as contract employees through a grant Contra Costa County received. The team did not earn paid leave, benefits or retirement. In an effort to sustain the program, Contra Costa located additional funding sources, and funneled the monies through Child Abuse Prevention Council. The Parent Partner

team are now employees of Child Abuse Prevention Council which is co-located at Contra Costa County Children and Family Services. The Parent Partner supervisor is supervised by a manager at the Child Abuse Prevention Council and a manager at Contra Costa County Children and Family Services. The team now earns paid leave, paid holidays, retirement and medical and dental benefits.

### **Lessons Learned**

- The agency must assess system readiness to ensure program sustainability. Contra Costa County initially decided who their target population was going to be and they focused on that audience.
- Initially, the program should remain true to the original program model. Contra Costa followed the curriculum developed to ensure model fidelity.
- The program should continue to solicit feedback from the population it serves. This can be accomplished by surveys, interviews and focus groups.
- The program should be a voluntary program. Current clients should have the ability to choose if they want a Parent Partner.
- The Parent Partner supervisor role is an essential role in program success. The supervisor serves as a conduit to the Parent Partners, child welfare and the court system.

### **Recommendations for Solano County**

- Utilize Contra Costa County for Technical Assistance once Solano County's Parent Mentors program resumes.
- Follow Contra Costa County's training and implementation program.
- Implement a one-year pilot project with funding from the same funding source previously utilized to pay Parent Mentors as contract employees. Identify a child welfare supervisor to provide a one-year commitment to implement a training program and supervise the project and staff.

- Locate a funding stream to sustain the program. Investigate and apply for grants to sustain the program long term.
- Create geographic assignments and specialty areas for the Parent Partners. Contra Costa County assigns Parent Partners to different geographical locations to ensure the Parent Partners are experts on resources in their assigned areas. Contra Costa County also has a Parent Partner that specializes in providing support to parents with medically fragile children.

### **Conclusion**

Contra Costa County has worked hard at successfully developing, implementing and sustaining the Parent Partner program. The Parent Partner program has demonstrated success in improving outcomes for families. The data indicate that parent clients served by the Parent Partners view the program as not only beneficial, but necessary. Parent Partner staff also report high job satisfaction. Contra Costa County continually works at improving its program and evolving to effectively serve the larger community. The staff is made up of a team that works hard towards the program's mission.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Contra Costa County for allowing me to visit their county and offering their staff to assist me in completing my project. I would especially like to thank Neely McElroy and Judi Knittel for all of their patience, knowledge and assistance. They are truly dedicated to empowering families and best practice. I would also like to thank my county, Solano County, for offering me the opportunity to grow and develop as a professional. This was a truly an invaluable experience.

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