

# ***Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program: Lessons for San Francisco's Child Welfare***

**RENEE GREVENBERG**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Contra Costa County's Child Welfare Agency has long been a leader in developing partnerships to improve the child welfare system for service providers, foster parents, and relative and non-relative care givers.

After having implemented the Parent Partner Program, leadership in the agency has seen positive results and has acknowledged the potential success for partnerships in other aspects of child welfare services. By acknowledging the enormous successes garnered by the Parent Partner Program within the reunification division of the agency (with more parents successfully reunified with their children; and a decrease in the overall recidivism rate), the natural progression of these efforts were to expand the entire process and include parents as partners at other levels of services. By expanding partnerships within the overall service areas, it appears to have changed the culture and direction of the entire agency.

San Francisco County's child welfare system, has one of the highest rates of children in foster care of any county in the State of California. The numbers in San Francisco's child welfare system are particularly alarming, since the overall African-American population in the City and County of San Francisco has decreased drastically over the last five years. His-

torically, the city's African-American population ranged from 10.5% to 11.3%, yet the number of this community's children in out-of-home placement has far exceeded this group's representation in the overall population.

San Francisco's Child Welfare Services Agency would best benefit the families it serves by making a paradigm shift to fully respect, appreciate, and value parents by "honoring their ability to draw on intra-familial strengths and resources, in an effort to facilitate timely permanency for their children." Therefore, it is recommended that this paradigm and cultural shift become mandated for all child welfare staff whom work with families entering and participating in the child welfare service system in the City and County of San Francisco. If the City and County of San Francisco adopted, implemented and out into operation a similar model, such as Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program, the agency would enhance efforts at system change in the arena of foster care services. In order for this monumental change to evolve, it is necessary to have regular discussions in supervision at every level about the Parent Partner Program model, followed by objective assessments of the parents' progress throughout the life of the case in the child welfare system.

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## **Introduction**

Child welfare agencies are responsible to keep children safe while strengthening families, and respecting family values. When families come to the attention of child welfare agencies, and the intervention results in removal of a child from their parents, the responsibility of the agency becomes daunting.

In 2002, the Federal Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) determined that the California Child Welfare System needed to increase accountability and work towards identifying and meeting measurable outcomes. An evaluation of the California Welfare System highlighted poor outcomes for families. Every county in California was mandated by DHHS to develop a System Improvement Plan (SIP), and a self-evaluation to improve performance of measurable outcomes.

Contra Costa County's Child Welfare Services Agency is distinguished for advanced program designs and improved outcome for families. Contra Costa County Children and Families Division Director, Valerie Earley, Division Manager, Neeley McElroy, and Parent Partner Program Coordinator, Judi Knittel, showed leadership with the development and implementation of the Parent Partner Program in July 2002. In a participatory process, Ms. Earley, Ms. McElroy, and Ms. Knittel, along with various community partners, designed and developed a program that would acknowledge and support the success of parents who had benefited from their experience with the child welfare service system.

The directors and management team also understand that former recipients of service appear to possess "undeniable credibility" while working with current recipients of child welfare services. The directors and management team were also humble enough to accept that the 'status quo' did not and could never provide optimal outcomes for the families served. Their humility, vision, and courage gave credence to the enormous success of the Parent Partner Program, in Contra Costa County's Child Welfare Services Agency.

## **Background**

Contra Costa County was incorporated in 1850 as one of the original 27 counties of the State of California. In 2005, the population of this county was 1,006,486 with 494,254 males and 512,232 females. The age breakdown is as follows: 262,807—17 years and younger; 84,787—18–24 year olds; 278,303 25–44 year olds; 269,943, 45–64 year olds; 110,646 65 years and older. The average age in the county is 36 years old.

Race and ethnicity is broken down as follows: Whites alone—610,421; Blacks alone 93,820; Native American and Alaska Native—3,614; Asian alone—134,051; Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders alone—3,448; Hispanic or Latino alone—213,227; other race alone—120,638; two or more races—40,494.

Contra Costa County is a diverse county ranging from breathtakingly beautiful mountain scenes

in Danville and San Ramon to suburban blight of Richmond proper. It also has the elegance of Walnut Creek and the farmlands of Oakley.

Contra Costa County's Child Welfare Department is known for several excellent program designs, most notably the Parent Partner Program and the Independent Living Skills Program. Contra Costa County's Children and Family Services Agency has five sections that provide direct services to children and families. These sections are as follows:

**Emergency Response** unit which received over 20,000 calls last year and completed 7,530 face-to-face contacts in response to those calls.

**Family Maintenance** units which provide case-work to over 1,200 children and their families each month.

**Family Reunification** units which provide case-work services to over 1,700 children and their families each month.

**Permanency Planning** units which provide case-work services to over 2,100 children who are in out-of-home care.

**Adoption** units which placed 216 children in adoptive homes last year.

**Independent Living Skills Program** provides a wide array of services to teen children to assist them in their transition to independence. Ninety-two youth graduated from the Independent Living Skills program in 2007. Thirty-nine went to college, thirty-three found gainful employments, ten entered vocational training programs, seven attended technical school, and three entered the military. All youths were found to be successful.

## Findings

The Parent Partner Program was designed to assist parents navigate Contra Costa County's child welfare system in order to have improved outcomes for families participating in the system.

The Center For Social Services Research at the University of California, Berkeley reports that from October 1, 2005 to September 30, 2006 the demographics of Contra Costa County's Children

and Family Services foster care population was as follows:<sup>1</sup>

Ethnicity		
Blacks	4,931	17.7 %
Whites	7,822	28.1 %
Hispanics	13,813	49.6 %
Asian/PI	920	3.3 %
Native American	380	1.4 %
Missing	145	
Age		
<1 yr.	6,611	23.6 %
1-2 yrs.	4,243	15.1 %
3-5 yrs.	4,609	16.5 %
6-10 yrs.	5,850	20.9 %
11-15 yrs.	5,159	18.4 %
16-17 yrs.	1,536	5.5 %
missing	3	—

The analytic information is as follows:

- 68 cases with Parent Partner mentoring where the child was removed from the home between July 2005 and May 2006
- 68 matched historical cases from 2004 were chosen and matched according to ethnicity, removal reason, substance use, region of the county
- Length of time to reunification was calculated. Only cases listing "reunified with parent/guardian" were considered, and case placement dates were used to determine length of time to reunification.

## Demographics

Ethnicity of children with Parents Partner involvement		
White	36 children	52.94 %
Hispanic	14 children	20.59 %
Black	16 children	23.53 %
Asian/other	2 children	2.94 %
Age of children with Parent Partner involvement		
0-4 years		65 %
5-16 years		35 %

<sup>1</sup>This is based on the first placement episode of 5 days even if it is not the first actual episode. Data source: cws/cms 2006 Quarter 3 extract

### REUNIFICATION RATES WITHIN 12 MONTHS

49 % of the 68 cases with Parent Partner involvement achieved reunification in a 12-month period. 28 % of the matched group without Parent Partner involvement achieved reunification in a 12-month period.

### RATE OF RE-ENTRIES

#### Parent Partner Involved

24 children reunified within 6 month	35%
2 children were removed again after reunification	8%

#### Non-Parent Partner Involved

15 children reunified within 6 months	22%
7 children were removed again after reunification	47%

### Qualitative Data

Parent Partner Satisfaction Survey reports positive feedback in the following areas:

- Empowerment
- Understanding the System
- General Satisfaction
- Cultural Competency
- Service Needs

Parent Partner Focus Group reports positive feedback in the following areas:

- “Sameness” of experience helpful
- Mentoring through the court process
- Hope

Suggestions from the recipients of Parent Partner services:

- Parent Partner advocate in court
- Hire more Parent Partners

Interviews with child welfare workers and supervisors, Team Decision Making (TDM) coordinators, attorneys and judges produced the following positive feedback:

- Parent Partners bridge the gap between parents and the child welfare system.
- Parent Partners assist with communication.
- Parent Partners help parents keep up with their goals.
- Parent Partners help parents advocate for themselves.

Actual cost savings are in the process of being determined, and those findings should be available within the next few months.

### Conclusion

Contra Costa County's Child Welfare Service System has made enormous strides enhancing reunification and reducing rates of recidivism. The implementation of the Parent Partner Program continues to shift the paradigm toward parent and community involvement. Strength-based, family-centered practice is built on the foundation that all families have strength, and families are the experts regarding themselves and their history.

A family's history and culture is a source of strength, pride, and unity that must be honored by all who attempt to intervene in the family's processes. Contra Costa County's management team appears to acknowledge this philosophy and demonstrated this by appointing Ms. Judi Knittel as the program coordinator. Ms. Knittel is an experienced child welfare professional (also an adoptive parent), who was a participant in the child welfare services system. Ms. Knittel, under the supervision of Neely McElroy, CFC Division Manager of Countywide Services, has infused and expounded on the concept of parent empowerment. She initiates this concept when exercising leadership, support, education, and guidance in her daily supervision of the Parent Partners, all of whom are former recipients of direct services. The Parent Partners are constantly addressing their personal issues of transition from recipient of services, to service providers. These unique experiences and processes add credibility and enhance their value to this program.

The Parent Partner stated services and goals are:<sup>2</sup>

- 1 As *parent advocates*, the Parent Partners mentor parents currently involved in the system. It is expected that Parent Partners will attend TDM Meetings and Icebreakers as a supportive voice for the family;

<sup>2</sup>Excerpt from the Parent Partner pamphlet by Judi Knittel

- 2 As *parent leaders*, the Parent Partners will act as the “parent’s voice” and as participants on various committees and workgroups;
- 3 As *parent trainers*, the Parent Partner provides training to parents and to various professional and non-professional groups. The Parent Partners are able to enhance the training experience by sharing their unique perspective and real-life experience.

The Parent Partner Program has three full-time parent partners and four part-time parent partners. The first male partner recently joined the team in a part-time capacity. The parent partners must have successfully completed all requirements of the child welfare services system, including reunification with their children. (*See Appendix for Parent Partner Job Description.*)

## Funding

The Parent Partner Program is funded through the Federal Systems of Care Grant with a \$2,000,000, 5-year grant. The Child Abuse Prevention Council employs the staff of the Parent Partner Program. The program is in the final year of the five-year grant, but it is anticipated that the Federal System of Care will renew the five-year grant.

## Implications and Recommendations for San Francisco County

The City and County of San Francisco is a unique county in the State of California. It has unique demographics and characteristics, which require a unique solution to its equally unique set of problems.

Given the above, it is recommended that, in order for this program to be replicated and successfully implemented, there needs to be top management buy-in, including participation by and a directive from the director of the Human Services Agency, its deputy directors, program managers, supervisors, child protective services workers, and all other staff directly and indirectly involved with families. It is through this inclusive and participatory process that the agency’s goals of reducing rates of removals, increasing family reunification rates, and reducing the

rates of re-entries into the child welfare services system can be met.

Since these objectives towards our overall goal of keeping children out of the system, returning them home expeditiously, and reducing recidivism, is feasible as indicated by Contra Costa County’s efforts and successes, it is therefore recommended that this plan be developed and implemented in San Francisco. The plan can be developed in conjunction with support by the agency’s highest level of management, which would add credence and enhance its reverberation throughout the entire child welfare system.

The Homeless Prenatal Project is the contract agency that established the Peer Parent Program service for San Francisco’s child welfare system. Both San Francisco’s Peer Parent Program and Contra Costa’s Parent Partner Program are cutting edge designs that address the needs of families served within child welfare. Although, each program is unique, they each could learn from one another. For example, the Homeless Prenatal Peer Parent Program can benefit from additional funding to increase the number of Peer Parents. The program currently only has three peer parents to work with all the parents involved in San Francisco’s child welfare service system. Further, Contra Costa County’s Parent Partner Program conducts free ‘child welfare orientation meetings’ throughout the county on a monthly basis. This allows parents to access services in their community where they may have family, clergy, and other community support available to accompany them to the orientation meetings. The Homeless Prenatal Peer Parent Program may benefit from a similar level of community outreach.

The Homeless Prenatal Program is unique in its ability to provide clinical and recovery support to the Peer Parent Program staff because Homeless Prenatal is a program that provides drug treatment assessment, counseling, and referrals. The staff at Homeless Prenatal offer support to the Peer Parents. The Homeless Prenatal Peer Parent Program is unlike Contra Costa County’s Parent Partner Program in that it has a shared responsibility for identifying needs and providing support to the Peer Parent men-

tors. Furthermore, Peer Parents can access one hour per week of off-site therapy if they need support with their personal recovery or transitional issues. In Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program, that is the sole responsibility of the Program Coordinator, Judi Knittel.

Both Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program and San Francisco County's Homeless Prenatal Peer Parent Program leaders have agreed to share information, experiences, and solutions. There is a planned meeting for further dialogue on this subject in June 2008.

### Next Steps

San Francisco County's Homeless Prenatal Peer Parents Program currently has three full time Peer Mentors. The Program has provided services to families since January 2, 2008 in the following areas:

- Court visits
- Team Decision Making meetings
- Drug treatment intake appointments and visits
- Home visits
- Child visits
- Consultations with Protective Services Workers
- Office visits scheduled and drop-ins

The total number of unduplicated families served to date is 95. In terms of supporting groups, the number of unduplicated families served to date is 23.

The next step toward these service goals is to increase the number of families served from the current 95 office visits and drop-ins, plus the 23 involved in groups, to a combined total of 150 service units.

The incarcerated population is grossly underserved by child welfare systems of care. One important step to take would be to expand the Peer Parent Program to include access and services to incarcerated parents.

San Francisco County's Homeless Prenatal Peer Parent Program and Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program were established primarily to

reduce out-of home placements, increase timely reunifications and diminish the recidivism rate. That optimal goal is and should remain one that includes all the above noted facets of program intervention on behalf of children and families.

There is, unfortunately a small percentage of parents who do not reunify with their children. These parents are too often the least represented, the most ignored and, the ones that are most likely to return to the system with new infants. It is critical to address this population, and therefore the Peer Parent and Parent Partner groups seem most likely to have a positive impact on this population. These same groups can and do have intimate contact with all parents in reunification. We should all examine ways to support those who successfully reunify as well as those who do not reunify.

One such area where this particular concern can be addressed is with parents' whose parental rights are terminated, and their children are adopted. Currently, California adoption laws do not allow the disclosure of parents' identity to a child at any age unless the parents sign a "waiver of confidentiality". These adoption laws do not apply to the vast majority of parents in the child welfare systems because for these parents termination of parental rights is rarely voluntary.

Parents in the San Francisco Child Welfare Services System are not aware of the existence of this waiver nor are they aware of their right to sign this waiver. Therefore, every incidence of termination of parental rights that occurs in San Francisco's Juvenile Court is a lost opportunity for that child and their parent to have future contact. Both parent and child are denied their right of due process when this oversight occurs. The next step should be to incorporate a system to inform parents of their rights and to establish a process that includes the opportunity to sign the 'waiver of confidentiality' through San Francisco County's Juvenile Court process.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to humbly thank all of the following individuals: Joe Valentine, Contra Costa County's Director of Human Services, Valerie Earley, Director of Children and Family Services, Neely McElroy, Children and Family Services Division Manager, and Judi Knittel, Parent Partner Coordinator. In addition, I would like to thank Patrick Harrington for providing program data and information about the 'warm and fuzzy' program outcomes. In particular, I would like to thank Neely McElroy for allowing her staff to spend an enormous amount of time, energy, and support, which tremendously enhanced this learning process for me.

I would like to extend a special appreciation to Judi Knittel and the Parent Partners, Cheryl, Mary, Diane, and Sayida, all of whom played a tremendous role in my learning process. I am and will remain impressed with the work they do individually and collectively and the enthusiasm and love with which they go about making the lives of children and their parents more meaningful. I will remain eternally grateful for the willingness with which they shared precious time and knowledge with me and the Homeless Prenatal Peer Parent Program. I look forward to future fruitful collaborations with all of them.

## Resources

University of California, Berkeley—Center for Social Services Research  
2005 American Community Survey Data—US Census Bureau  
Judi Knittel—Parent Partner resource material



## APPENDIX

# Parent Partner Job Description

Parent Partners are parents (mothers and fathers) who have first-hand experience with the child welfare system, and who have exhibited exceptional qualities in their own efforts to develop viable permanency plans for their children, an understanding of how the child welfare system works, an appreciate of what it takes to be successful, and personal qualities that lend themselves to collaboration on various levels. The preferred Parent Partner candidate will possess a positive attitude, sincerity, and a willingness to help others. In order to be considered for this position, the Parent Partner's case must be closed, and he/she must be maintaining family stability.

**Parent Partners** are life-trained paraprofessionals who have successfully negotiated the child welfare system. These parents can offer a wealth of knowledge and experience in two ways:

- 1 As *parent advocates*, the Parent Partners will mentor parents currently involved in the child welfare system. It is expected that Parent Partners will attend TDM Meetings as a supportive voice for the family.
- 2 As *parent leaders*, the Parent Partners will act as the "parent's voice" as participants on various committees and workgroups.

Although the two functions are separate and distinct, it is expected that some Parent Partners will serve in both capacities.

### General Parent Partner Duties

- Allot the time necessary to work with the Parent Partner Coordinator and participate in professional development opportunities;
- Demonstrate an understanding of, and an ability to successfully implement concepts presented in orientation and training;
- Possess, or be willing to learn, "professional behavior" elements (e.g. ability to work with people, ability to clearly communicate with people, maintain confidentiality, and engage people in respectful interactions);
- Exhibit qualities of dependability, empathy, genuineness, respect, and maintain a positive and supportive attitude;
- Complete all paperwork, including but not limited to, leave request, demands, mileage forms, and correspondence in an organized, accurate, and timely fashion;
- Regularly attend supervision with the Parent Partner Coordinator.

### Parent Advocate Responsibilities

Parent Advocates are required to provide advocacy, support, and referral services to clients assigned to their caseload. The Parent Advocate is expected to:

- Actively participate as a parent mentor to families currently, involved with Contra Costa County Children and Family Services;
- Be willing and able to attend court appearances and meetings (including TDM's) when requested to do so by the parent;
- Make necessary contact in order to review pertinent family information and discuss cases with appropriate stake holders;
- Meet with his/her assigned parent(s) as agreed upon in supervision. It is anticipated that generally the Mentor and Mentee will meet on average 8 hours per month, although more or less contact may be approved by the Parent Partner Coordinator;
- Assess the client and determine the case needs. Parent Advocates will serve as a knowledgeable source of community resources;
- Document all contacts and interactions with their mentee on approved contact form. Documentation must be accurate and timely.
- Encourage and support the mentee's positive behavior and celebrate his/her successes.

### Parent Leader Responsibilities

Parent Leaders will attend and will offer input that represents the parents' perspective and interests. The Parent Leader is expected to:

- Attend all meetings as requested, and serve as the parents' voice on committees and workgroups;
- Possess, or be willing to develop the skills necessary to discuss their experience in workgroups and on panels;
- Help with and attend special events, as required;
- Follow through on all assignments.

### Minimum Qualifications

**Education:** Some high school education. Diploma or GED preferred

**Experience:** Applicant must have experience as a parent or family member who has been involved in the child welfare system. A valid driver's license is preferred.

**Funding:** The System of Care is a five-year grant. There are full time and part time positions available. An hourly rate will be paid for the work performed. Parent Partners will report directly to the Parent Partner Coordinator.

*Prepared by Judi Knittel 11/9/04*

