

# ***The Parent Partner Program In Contra Costa County: A Success Story***

**MARISSA KING**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

John C. Maxwell once said “Believing in people before they have proved themselves is the key to motivating people to reach their potential.” This message is the embodiment of an emerging best practice in Contra Costa County called the Parent Partner Program (PPP). The PPP, modeled after St. Christopher’s in New York, was created in 2005 when Contra Costa County administrators sought to find effective means for improving their performance outcomes under the California Child Welfare Outcome Accountability Act (AB 636). The program offers a unique approach to enhancing reunification rates with birth parents, while increasing permanence and reducing recidivism.

Under the Parent Partner Program, parents who have been reunified with their children act as parent mentors, coaches, and trainers to parents who are newly engaged with child welfare services. Reunified parents have undeniable credibility within a niche community; their voice is one of experience, knowledge, and perhaps, most importantly, success.

### **Findings**

Preliminary research indicates the Parent Partner Program has successfully contributed to improving outcomes for children and families; reunification and retention rates in Contra Costa County have increased; and recidivism is on the decline. However, the success of the program stretches beyond a quantifiable percentage. Success, as Cheryl, a Parent Partner, eloquently stated is in the program’s ability to give parents, like herself, “hope.”

### **Recommendations**

San Mateo County has a long standing reputation for being an innovative county that provides exemplary services to its constituents. Adding a program/service similar to that of the Parent Partner Program to the array of services provided to children and families in the community complements the existing best practices. The following are recommendations for consideration:

- Add Parent Partner services to the agency’s expanding repertoire of innovative, client focused services.
- Identify an executive champion and program champion to engage and drive the development and implementation of a program modeled after Contra Costa County’s Parent Partner Program.
- Explore viable funding sources (Annie E. Casey Foundation, Family to Family Initiative funding, allocations within Title IV-E) and investigate a contracting entity to “house” services.
- Incorporate elements of the Parent Partner Program into the Strengthening Families Program (SFP) parent training curriculum; inclusion points include the parent orientation and modules focused on reducing parent anxiety, increasing self advocacy, and improving engagement efforts.
- Enhance existing Team Decision Making services by building a parent partner into the network of support systems.

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## **Historical Framework**

The child welfare system in the United States was created as a mechanism to investigate claims of abuse and neglect of the children in a community. Historically, states set their own policy agendas surrounding safeguarding the care of children. However, in the 1960's and 1970's, there was a dramatic rise in the number of children who were removed from their home. As a result, several pieces of legislation were passed which dramatically changed the shape of children and family services across the nation.

The most significant piece of legislation was the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, Public Law, 96-272, which was created in 1980, and re-written as the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997. Key provisions of ASFA were designed to:

- Ensure that child safety, permanency, and well-being are of paramount concern in any child welfare decision;
- Encourage states to expedite permanency decisions for children in foster care;
- Promote and increase the number of adoptions, particularly through a new adoption incentive payment program;
- Establish performance standards and a state accountability system, whereby states face financial penalties for failure to demonstrate improvements in child outcomes; and
- Encourage states to test innovative approaches to delivering child welfare services, by expanding the existing services (<http://pewfostercare.org/research/docs/Legislative.pdf>).

In response to the federal law, the California State Legislature passed the Child Welfare System

Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) in 2001. The goals of AB636 are to create a system that holds local agencies accountable to the state for healthier outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system. As a result county and local agencies conducted self assessment(s) and developed "self improvement plan(s)" which explained the means by which Contra Costa County would attain the goals outlined in AB 636 . In short, the state defined the goals of AB 636 to:

- Protect children from abuse and neglect;
- Have children safely maintained in their own homes whenever possible and appropriate;
- Provide children permanency and stability in their living situations;
- Preserve the continuity of family relationships and connections for children; and
- Enhance families' capacity to provide for their children's needs;
- Ensure children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs;
- Ensure children receive adequate services to meet physical and mental health needs; and
- Prepare youth emancipating from foster care to transition into adulthood;

Many state and local agencies have actively sought to find "best practices" and create successful systems that allow them to meet the above goals. One nationally recognized "best practice" yields from Contra Costa County where administrators, social workers, community partners, and parents collaborated to develop an innovative program called the "Parent Partner Program." Since its inception, in October 2005, the program has received numerous accolades and has been highly recognized as an effective

tive means of providing quality, customer-centered services which dramatically enhance the outcomes for children and families who are involved with the child welfare system.

The purpose of this case study is to examine Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program and assess the feasibility of developing a similar program for the Children and Family Services Division of San Mateo County's Human Services Agency. More specifically, this case study will examine the development of the program and its services, the program's successes, challenges, and lessons learned, the relative fiscal implications, and then suggest recommendations for San Mateo County.

### Program Development and Description

In 2001, the Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department's Children and Family Services Bureau conducted a self evaluation and embarked on the re-design of its child welfare services delivery, a requirement of AB 636. The re-design efforts focused on increasing the capacity of the community and family support within the county in order to provide a safe environment for children and increasing placement resources and permanency outcomes. (Contra Costa County, 2001)

After securing a 2003 Family-to-Family System of Care Grant, Contra Costa County administrators placed the design and development of the Parent Partner Program in the capable hands of Judi Knittel, Program Coordinator and Neely McElory, Children and Family Services Division Manager.

In late 2005, after extensive research involving community focus groups, stakeholder analysis, and several comparison/contrast studies of various parent mentor/advocate models (Kaiser, 2005), the Parent Partner Program was birthed. The program was built based on nationally recognized best practices and the county's systemic priorities. Guidelines were established as the foundation for service delivery. They included;

- **Protecting the safety of children** by shielding them from abuse and neglect and maintaining the children in their homes whenever possible;

- **Supporting Parents** by believing that they are the “fundamental building blocks in children's health, social, mental, and physical development” and providing support services that will enhance the parents capacity to provide for their children through training, mentoring, coaching and counseling, as well as through advocacy, resources, referrals, and support networks;
- **Collaborating with Department of Health and Human Services** by promoting parental involvement in case planning activities and providing opportunities for enhanced communication and shared leadership between parent and child welfare professionals; and
- **Collaborating with the Community to Protect Children** by working with community based organizations to provide resources and develop partnerships between the people working for, and with, the Parent Partner Program (Contra Costa, 2001).

The mission of the Parent Partner Program focuses on helping families develop supportive relationships that will strengthen and support parents and families involved in child welfare, and to honor their ability to draw on family strengths, and resources in order to facilitate timely permanency for their children (Parent Partner Program Description).

Parent partners are “life-trained” paraprofessionals who have successfully navigated the child welfare system and who have been reunified with their children. Parent partners not only provide support and advocacy for other parents, they also act as leaders, representing the voice of parents on county leadership teams and numerous committees and panels (local and at the legislative level). They assist in developing and delivering various training and participate in “ice breakers” (initial Team Decision Making meetings) (Program Orientation Guide, 2007).

### PARENT PARTNER IDENTIFICATION

Potential parent partners are identified by child welfare staff, namely social workers. Careful consideration is given to the selection of parent mentors. There are certain requirements one must possess in

order to be considered for the role of a parent partner. They are addressed below. (Knittel, 2008)

### **SELECTION REQUIREMENTS**

All parent partners must have “exhibited exceptional qualities in their own efforts to develop viable permanency plans for their children, as well as have an understanding of the child welfare system, and the importance the intervention of the system had in their life. Potential parent partners must have an appreciation of what it takes to be successful, and the personal qualities that lend themselves to collaboration on various levels” (Parent Partner Job Description, 2004). Another essential element is that potential parent mentors must understand that being a parent partner “isn’t just a job, or a pay check.”

During an informal interview, Diane, a part-time Parent Partner, shared her motivation for becoming a parent partner. She “always wanted to be a success story” and being a parent partner allowed her to live that dream. She further shared, “A Parent Partner saw the success in me, and now I am able to help others realize the success in them. It gives me tremendous pride; I would volunteer if the money were gone.”

### **HIRING PRACTICES**

Parent Partners go through a rigorous selection process which involves lengthy interview, over the phone and in person with the program coordinator. All parent partners receive extensive training and are paired (shadow) with a veteran parent during initial matches and meetings. Retention is difficult; if ten parents are contracted and trained, the exerted effort may yield one or two parent partners. (Knittel, 2008)

In addition to on-boarding new parent mentors, the program coordinator works extensively with each of the parents on professional development through regular individual and group meetings.

### **PROGRAM MANAGEMENT**

All parent partners are considered contract employees, which affords some flexibility in hiring and management practices (The program is currently

under contract with the Child Care Abuse Council in Contra Costa County). The program coordinator, partners and mentors are co-located with child welfare staff in county offices and have full access to the facilities, equipment, and resources. However, it should be noted that parent partners do not have access to CMS/CWS (the child welfare statewide database system).

### **CASELOAD MANAGEMENT**

In its first year (July–December 2005), the Parent Partner Program assisted 44 families, averaging 7.3 cases/families per month. In 2006, the number of families quadrupled to 204 families, an average of 17 families per month. Then in 2007, caseloads increased by 80 families, and the team assisted 284 families throughout the year; averaging 23.5 families per month.

## **Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned**

### **SUCCESS—HIGHER LEVEL OF SERVICE**

In a Peer Quality Case Review conducted in March 2006, Contra Costa County social workers, supervisors, and parents reported that the practice of “utilizing parent partners . . . to engage the family, can contribute to a higher level of service for the family, as well as promote timely reunification.” The practices also demonstrate the county’s commitment to strength-based services, empathy, concern, and honesty. The same audience dually noted that the use of team decision-making meetings, parent partners, wrap around services, and other multi-disciplinary meetings as well as identifying members and resources as quickly as possible, demonstrates the county’s desire to utilize a team-based approach to services and placement of children within their community. (Perkins, 2006)

### **SUCCESS—HIGHER REUNIFICATION RATES, LOWER RECIDIVISM RATES**

In a 2007 internal evaluation, research staff used a model of logistic regression (a measure of statistical probability) on a random sample of 136 cases that were engaged in the child welfare system in 2004.

Of the 136 cases sampled, 68 had worked with parent partners, and 68 of the cases had worked without parent partners. The research found that parents working with the program had a higher likelihood (49%) of reunification within 12 months, whereas 28% of the families without a parent partner were reunified within the same time period. Participation in the program also appears to have had an impact on recidivism rates. Below is a comparison of reunification and recidivism rates with the same sample population.

Parent Partner Involved	No Parent Partner Involved
24 children were reunified in 6 months (36%)	15 children were reunified in 6 months (22%)
2 children were removed again after reunification (8%)	7 children were removed again after reunification (47%)

#### SUCCESS—POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM CONSUMERS

In 2006, the Center for Social Service Research at UC Berkeley conducted a Parent Partner Fidelity and Satisfaction Survey. The survey provided positive feedback from the program consumers. Most notably, respondents indicated the following parent partner services as promising and helpful: 1) assisting parents in bridging the gap between parents and the system; 2) aiding them in facilitating effective communication; 3) supporting them in maintaining and achieving their goals; and 4) providing assistance in enabling parents to advocate for themselves (Harrington, 2007).

#### CHALLENGES—CHANGING THE PARADIGM

As with the implementation of any new program, there are certain systemic implications that accompany change. The Parent Partner Program provided an opportunity for parents, staff, and administrators to evaluate their paradigms and embrace new options for: demystifying parents; strengthening the relationship between staff and families; shifting the culture; improving connections with the community; and including “experts” (parents who have successfully navigated the system) in the decision and policy-making process.

#### CHALLENGES—MINDFUL BOUNDARIES

An ongoing challenge for parent partners is minding boundaries. In addition to initial training on boundaries, during the hiring process, Program Coordinator, Judi Knittel, has ongoing and frequent discussions about boundaries with the parents and mentors. She reminds the partners to be mindful of their boundaries, and to pay careful attention that the line between mentor and friend is not blurred. Clear definitions of allowable relationships and respectful boundaries have been created to ensure a common sense of clarity and purpose.

#### CHALLENGES—PARTNERING FATHERS

Similar to the child welfare system as a whole, the Parent Partner Program is consistently challenged to recruit and retain fathers as parent partners.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

In November 2007, program administrators reflected on the county’s climate and factors contributing to their success. The elements that provide support for the programs success included: 1) collaboration with key partners and staff (i.e. Mental Health, Parent Partner Program Coordinator, the System of Care (SOC) Grant Coordinator, SOC Planning and Policy Council, etc. ); 2) support and vision from county administrators; and 3) changes within the state’s approach to child welfare services (Harrington, 2007).

#### Fiscal Impact

The Parent Partner Program was established under a five-year System of Care Grant from the Family to Family Initiative in 2003, and to date, the allocated funds have not been exhausted. Contra Costa County is planning to apply for a no cost extension of the grant at the end of the federal fiscal year in September 2008.

Salaries for the program coordinator and the two full-time parent partners are paid on a contract basis through grant funding. The 2006/07 total for the three positions was \$137,372, and based on the parent partner job description the hourly wages for a parent partner are \$15 hour. Part-time parent men-

tors are paid through a board order, via stipend; parent mentors wages totaled \$45,744 during the same period.

General operating costs are time studied to the children and family services budget. Operating costs are inclusive of parent handbooks, training supplies, transportation and other reimbursable expense fees, such as conferences/workshops, etc.

## Recommendations

San Mateo County has a long-standing reputation for being an innovative county that provides exemplary services to its constituents. Adding a program/service similar to that of the Parent Partner Program to the repertoire of services provided to children and families in the county would be a complement to existing best practices. The following are recommendations for consideration:

- Add parent partner services to the agency's expanding repertoire of innovative, client-focused services.
- Identify an executive champion and program champion to engage and drive the development and implementation of a program parallel to Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program.
- Explore viable funding sources (Annie E. Casey Foundation, Family to Family Initiative funding, allocations within Title IV-E) and investigate a viable contracting entity to "house" services.
- Incorporate elements of the Parent Partner Program into the Strengthening Families Program (SFP) parent training curriculum (inclusion points could be provided via the parent orientation and modules could focus on reducing parent anxiety and improving engagement efforts).
- Enhance existing team decision-making services by building a parent partner into the network of support systems.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude Syida, Cheryl, Maria, and the many other Parent Partners who shared their stories; their struggles; and their

successes with me. I admire and applaud you and your commitment to making a difference in the lives of others.

I would also like to thank Judi Knittel for showing me, and all those that she encounters, the true definition of social work—supporting, guiding, coaching, growing others. Judi, You are an inspiration to me; to your staff; to the parents they support; and the community. It is evident that you are the glue that holds this program together.

Judi and the Parent Partner Team. . . someone once said "To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world." Thank you for being the light that makes things brighter in someone else's world.

In addition to thanking the Parent Partner Team for the work that they do, I would also like to thank Neely McElroy and Judi Knittel for taking the risk to create this incredible program. Neely and Judi's hard work, passion, and creative energy is woven through the fabric of every aspect of the program, its services and the Parent Partners.

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