

**PARENT PARTNERS SUPPORT FAMILIES  
IN THEIR JOURNEY TO REUNIFICATION: RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN MARIN COUNTY**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Background**

Parent Partners are a form of peer mentors that provide mutual understanding and support for parents who have had their children removed from their care and placed into foster care. Parent partners provide empathy, education, and tangible supports to help families overcome barriers and successfully reunify with their children. Counties all over the country have been utilizing peer mentoring in child welfare programs since 2002 with some very promising results. Various studies have shown that the use of parent partners have resulted in faster and more frequent reunifications, fewer placement moves for foster children and lower rates of re-entry into care.

**Contra Costa County's Program**

Contra Costa County's Parent Partner program has been effectively working with families since 2005. The county developed its program after thoughtfully engaging with the community, courts, and child welfare staff, to ensure understanding of the role of the Parent Partner as well as the potential for collaboration. This preparation, along with ongoing training and attentive supervision, has proven crucial to the success of the program. Social workers, who are housed in the same offices as parent partners, have come to see the value of having a peer to mentor, encourage, and provide hope to parents entering what is often an overwhelming system.

## **Recommendations**

Marin County has already established a successful peer mentoring program in the children/youth mental health program and could generalize these successes to the child welfare field. It would be advantageous to heed the lessons learned by Contra Costa County's program, especially around training and ongoing support for new parent partners, both from other parent partners as well as a dedicated supervisor. Additionally, finding a way to track data and assess program effectiveness will be challenging but important in long-term implementation.

# **PARENT PARTNERS SUPPORT FAMILIES IN THEIR JOURNEY TO REUNIFICATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN MARIN COUNTY**

## **Introduction**

In child welfare, the traditional service delivery model has included a social worker as the primary point of contact for families involved in the system, as well as attorneys, therapists, substance abuse treatment specialists, as well as other service providers. Within this constellation of professional providers, families often feel there is no one who truly understands their experience of having a child removed from their care. The use of peer mentors, or “Parent Partners,” in child welfare is a way to bridge this gap and introduce an individual with “shared experiences” who can mentor, encourage, and instill hope in a client entering a complex and challenging system.<sup>1</sup> Parent Partners are a category of paraprofessionals who have experienced having a child removed and placed in foster care, and later have successfully reunified with that child. They offer a type of empathy and understanding that has resulted from their experiences, and the perspective those experiences bring. Additionally, parent partners are able to instill hope in parents going through the process of reunification, as they are an example of how to successfully reunify after a removal.<sup>1</sup>

## **What the Research Tells Us**

The concept of Parent Partners is not a new one. Child welfare agencies across the country have been successfully utilizing peer mentors for many years, with some programs dating back to 2002.<sup>1</sup> Some programs have focused on working with families involved with the system before a

child has ever been removed, while others focus exclusively on parents whose children have already been removed. Several of these programs have been subject to outcome studies to determine if peer mentors have created favorable outcomes for families who have participated in this service. Rauber (2009) reviewed studies on Parent Partner programs from New York, Michigan, Kentucky and Iowa. She found that when families received Parent Partner services, the average length of stay for their children in foster care was reduced, the likelihood that they re-entered care within a year was significantly lower, they experienced fewer placement moves, and the families had higher percentages of reunification than families who did not have Parent Partners. Additionally, other studies have focused on the emotional and supportive benefits of Parent Partner programs and how these encourage parental behavior change. One study focusing on a Parent Partner mentoring program in Colorado found that the use of parent mentors provided a feeling of mutual understanding, supplied much-needed parent advocacy, and also afforded a larger family voice to child welfare policy and practice<sup>3</sup>. An important benefit also noted in the study was that the relationships that developed between the parent and parent partner during involvement with the program oftentimes continued after involvement with the child welfare system ended, thus reducing recidivism<sup>3</sup>.

### **Contra Costa County Parent Partner Program**

In 2004, Contra Costa County received a System of Care grant from the Children's Bureau and used it to create its Parent Partner program. The county spent time developing and planning for the program and began working with its first parent partner in 2005. Special attention was paid to how the parent partners would fit into the larger agency and how they would be trained and supported in their work. Along those lines, the first year of the program included engagement of

the courts, the social workers, and time spent training the Parent Partners on different aspects of the child welfare system. Since its inception, the program has grown considerably and currently employs six parent partners and three Early Intervention and Outreach (substance abuse recovery) Specialists. The county will soon be expanding the program to include three new Parent Partners who can be present at Team Decision Making meetings before a child is even removed. Currently, referrals are created when a child is detained, and a parent partner is assigned to meet the parent at the courtroom for the detention hearing and offer his/her voluntary services. The program is currently serving approximately 150 parents.

Once a parent voluntarily accepts the services of this program, the parent partner engages the parent and offers education and support as needed. The partner can provide education on the child welfare system as well as advocacy with service providers or more tangible services.

These might include accompanying a parent when he/she applies for aid, helping the parent look for employment or helping him/her find housing.

Parent partners in the Contra Costa program do not keep any documentation of their work with parents. This allows parent partners to focus their energy on supporting the parents, not on completing paperwork. This becomes even more important when you consider that many of the parent partners do not excel at written documentation and such an activity would present significant challenges. Their supervisor tracks some information, such as if a parent has been contacted multiple times and has not responded to a parent partner. This information is useful while determining if ongoing involvement in the case is appropriate. Parent partners do not necessarily share all of their information on a case with social workers, but will bring up issues such as a parent who is trying to get in touch with a social worker and hasn't been able to reach them. Additionally, social workers are trained to not mention parent partners in court reports or

contact notes, as it is imperative that parent partners are not pulled into the court realm.

Understandably, having information included in a court report that was shared by a parent to a parent partner, or having a parent partner testify in a hearing, could all seriously undermine any trust that has been developed between the parent partner and the parent, or the program's credibility with future clients.

Social workers have given very positive feedback about the Parent Partner program. They have expressed that the parent partners offer many supportive and tangible benefits to parents that they are unable to. For example, a parent partner can show a mother how to ride the bus with her three children in order to make it to an appointment on time. This may be practical knowledge that a social worker just does not possess. Similarly, the parent partner can help "sensitize the system" by helping social workers be more realistic in their expectations for parents. The relationships that parent partners have built with child welfare staff allow them to provide feedback to social workers about several areas. For example, they could recommend appropriate substance abuse treatment facilities for clients, or provide a parent voice on the development of policies and procedures.

The Parent Partner program is run by a contract with the Child Abuse Prevention Council in Contra Costa County, who is the employer of both the parent partners and their supervisor. This allows them to access parenting programs, a petty cash fund, and other resources that might not be available if they were county employees. The parent partners and their supervisor have workspaces in the child welfare office; they have county badges and drive county cars. This co-location has been crucial for effective communication with their social worker counterparts, and has also afforded them easier access to county trainings and other resources to keep them remain informed of changing policies and court culture.

## **Challenges**

In hearing from the parent partners working in Contra Costa, one of the most interesting points they brought up was that even though they had been through “the system,” when they began training as parent partners they realized that they previously knew very little about how the larger child welfare process actually worked. They lacked understanding about court proceedings and timelines, about services (other than the ones they themselves utilized) and other aspects of the reunification process. The current parent partners also talked about the challenge of entering, what was for many, their first paraprofessional job. Several stated they lacked skills such as keeping track of appointments on a calendar, how to speak to other professionals in a meeting, and how to approach other parents in an initial contact. They all expressed the importance of training in the early part of their experience as parent partners; training on both the child welfare system and around how to work effectively as a paraprofessional. Shadowing current parent partners was a crucial component of their induction into the new role and helped them build a repertoire of tools to use when first meeting parents, when motivating parents, or even when advocating for them. They also discussed the significance of having other parent partners help support them in their work. They talked about the team of parent partners as a “family” and how they provided formal and informal support for one another; they may have lunch together and decompress after a tough court hearing, or one might cover a Team Decision-Making meeting when the other cannot make it. They have formed a network that supports and encourages each parent partner in their job, which can be both challenging and triggering at times. The supervisor is crucial in overseeing and nurturing this support, which is enhanced and monitored during a monthly, four-hour group supervision.

## **What is Currently Happening in Marin – Parent Partners in the Mental Health System**

Since 1999, the County of Marin has contracted with the non-profit agency Community Action Marin (CAM) to provide the Family Partnership Program for families involved in the child and adult mental health systems. This program includes both Family Partners and Youth Mentors with a total of about ten FTE staff. The Family Partner Program is supervised by a parent who herself had a child in the mental health system. She is co-located in the Youth and Family Services (YFS) office, working directly with its staff and supervisors. Family partners are assigned to ongoing YFS cases, and three of the family partners are assigned to Adult mental health clients or stationed at Psychiatric Emergency Services. Additionally, Seneca contracts with CAM to provide as-needed family partners to their wraparound clients, who include families involved with Juvenile Probation or Children and Family Services. Last year, this program served approximately 72 clients in the children's system alone.

In their work with families, family partners are coaching parents as well as training them, and all have been certified in the "Triple P Parenting" course to assist them in providing these services. Their role includes orienting a family to the services available, doing psych-education about a child/youth's illness, engaging family members to participate in helping the child/youth in the path to recovery, and making sure a child/youth's and family's voices are heard in treatment planning. If needed, a family partner may also help a parent find housing, food, or connect them to other resources in the community. Family partners have been trained so they can bill MediCal for some of their services. This has helped shape the way they document and how they develop client plans, as they have to create specific objectives and activities to meet those objectives in order to successfully draw funds from MediCal.

This program is an excellent starting point for developing a program to specifically serve



families in the child welfare system here in Marin. It incorporates many of the elements that the Contra Costa program has successfully utilized including: co-location, using an outside agency to hire and monitor program staff, and using a supervisor who is especially attuned to the issues facing the parent partners. However, it is likely that it will be more difficult to recruit and retain parent partners for the child welfare system in Marin County. This is largely because of the small size of the county, where there are fewer parents who have successfully reunified. Additionally, many of the parents who successfully reunified have moved out of the county, due to the high cost of living in Marin.

### **Implications for Implementation in Marin County**

The most important aspects of the successful Contra Costa Parent Partner Program seem to include both the intensive planning and ongoing oversight of the program. It is clear that child welfare staff must embrace the concept of parent partners before they can welcome their presence in the office, and ultimately work collaboratively with them on a case. For example, the current supervisor of Contra Costa County's parent partner program discussed how if the social worker did not recognize the value of parent partners, they might not invite them to crucial meetings about the parent and may not communicate other important issues. Doing work up front to increase social worker understanding of the roles and value of parent partners seemed to be very significant in the later success of the program. Additionally, the county engaged the courts, CASAs, and other community agencies on the purpose of the parent partners, so that they would encourage parental participation and overall communication.

In order to create a parent partner program in Marin County, it is recommended that a process begin to engage social workers, attorneys, courts, CASAs, residential treatment facilities, and

other community partners about the proposed program. It would be necessary to identify a supervisor of the program that had a child welfare background and could help train parent partners on the intricacies of the system as well as stay abreast of changing policies and best practices that social workers would be using with parents. Additionally, it is important that several parent partners are working in the program so that they can support one another on what can be a very challenging job. There is also a need to have enough parent partners so that conflicts of interest do not occur. As Marin is a small county, there is always a possibility that a parent partner could know a parent from the community and would have a difficult time mentoring them as a result of that previous (or current) relationship.

Utilizing a program, such as Community Action Marin or the Child Abuse Prevention Council, to handle the hiring and employment of parent partner program staff would be beneficial, especially considering that parent partners may have criminal backgrounds that might be a barrier to county employment. It would also create a very tangible division that is reassuring for parents to know that the parent partners are not employed by “CPS.”

Another important aspect of assessing the ongoing functioning and success of such a program would include data tracking. A challenge of the Contra Costa County model is that the parent partners do not document their contacts with parents so there is little data available to determine which aspects of the program are crucial to its success. For example, it would be challenging to tease out whether parents who meet more frequently with their parent partners are more likely to reunify or less likely to re-enter the system after reunification. Currently in Marin County, statistics show that the time to reunification is well within federal guidelines. However, the agency struggles with re-entry after reunification and is developing strategies as part of our System Improvement Plan to address this. It would be important to determine if a parent partner

program helped reduce the rate of re-entry after reunification. This can be modeled after other programs that have shown parent partners help parents develop confidence that they will be successful on their own in the future, and increase their self-reliance<sup>1</sup>.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Judi Knittel and Kathy Marsh for sharing their most valuable time and wisdom, as well as inspiring me with their dedication to the parent partner program. It was truly delightful to hear from your enthusiastic team of parent partners and all the knowledge they have gained about working effectively with families and each other. Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions and share the structure of your program.

### **References**

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