

Parents' Social Workers Help Parents Succeed

by Lisa Pilnik

For many parents in child welfare cases, finding the right services and completing them are key to resolving what brought them to court and reunifying with their children. Yet starting and sticking with substance abuse treatment, parenting classes, mental health treatment and other services can be difficult for parents already dealing with difficult personal issues (including separation from their children) and not used to accessing community resources. That's where Yolanda Lewis-Harris comes in.

Ms. Lewis-Harris is a social worker who works with respondent parents in child welfare cases in the 4th Judicial District in Colorado. She helps her clients find resources that meet their needs, and does whatever it takes to help them succeed, from providing transportation to coordinating with service providers, agency caseworkers and attorneys. Her position is unique in that she is employed by the respondent parents' attorneys, so her clients know she is on their side, and her work is covered by attorney-client privilege.

Getting Started

Lewis-Harris' work is funded by a family reunification grant given to

her jurisdiction by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Most of the project involved expanding the district's existing work on behalf of substance abusing families—including expanding their family drug treatment court and funding an additional CASA supervisor—but the social worker position is completely new.

The 4th Judicial District has 13 panel attorneys who represent respondent parents. Once the federal grant was obtained, the attorneys formed a limited liability company to employ Ms. Lewis-Harris (so her work would be considered attorney-work product), and she was given an office in the courthouse and began work in January of this year. She works only with parents who have substance abuse issues, and her cases are assigned by the courts (after the attorneys and their clients agree) to ensure that she has no more than one case with each panel attorney at one time.

Doing Things Differently

Unlike most other professionals involved in a child welfare case, Lewis-Harris has an small caseload, between eight and 15 cases at any time. This allows her to become more involved in each parent's life,

and to provide many more day-to-day services and supports. Lewis-Harris generally starts by attending the family's preliminary permanency proceeding (the initial hearing), where the parents are informed of the charges and referred for mental health and substance abuse assessments. At this point Lewis-Harris completes a family data sheet with basic information about the family. She also has parents sign a release form. This confirms the clients want her help, and allows her to provide transportation and speak to other professionals about the case.

The next step is for Lewis-Harris to meet with the parents in their home, preferably within a week of the first court hearing. At the home visit she asks them to share their background and their story, then helps them identify their goals. These goals go beyond the case plan goals, and include things like going to college or moving to a safer community. After that she tries to meet with clients once or twice per week at their homes. These meetings occur more frequently at the beginning of a case, and then decrease as the parents build other support systems.

Social Workers and Parents Attorneys Working Together Nationwide

Several public defender and parents' attorney offices across the country also employ social workers to assist attorneys with investigations and/or give clients more targeted help and support:

- The **Parent Representation Program of the Washington State Office of Public Defense** has one contract social worker for every four attorneys. They have social workers in 25 of Washington's 39 counties. Social workers provide parent support, investigative, and advocacy services and receive an orientation and continuing education. (View this program's social worker guidelines by visiting "Web Link" at CLP Online: www.childlawpractice.org)
- The **Center for Family Representation in New York** works in Community Advocacy Teams consisting of an attorney for the parent, a social worker, and a "parent advocate" (a parent who has successfully reunified with a child in foster care). Find at more at www.cfrny.org/new_legal.asp
- **New Jersey's Office of Parental Representation** uses a social worker to supervise its parent advocates. Find out more at www.state.nj.us/defender/div_opr.shtml#GeneralInfo

Through their work with Lewis-Harris, parents learn to identify their own needs and become familiar with community resources. An agency caseworker may only have time to hand the parent a list of standard resources, leaving the parent to choose and connect to services. In contrast, Lewis-Harris takes each client to their appointments and ensures they get what they need. This may include visiting a food bank, receiving assistance from churches, requesting public housing, or getting help with rent or utilities.

Another difference between Lewis-Harris and the agency caseworker is that she is on the parents' side. Anything they tell her is confidential from everyone except their attorney (unless there is a safety risk to a child), so parents can feel more comfortable being honest. Although the agency may be compelled to bring the parent back into court if they've done something wrong, Lewis-Harris' first priority is to help the parent address the issue. For example, if a client misses service appointments or suffers a relapse in his substance abuse recovery, he may call Lewis-Harris for help figuring out how to get back on track and then present a plan of action to the agency caseworker and the court.

Keeping Connected

Lewis-Harris also attends meetings with agency staff and service providers, and will ask the caseworker to schedule these meetings if they are not happening frequently enough (every four to six weeks). This ensures all professionals are on the same page and have the same information. "When we go into court it's really helpful if everyone knows what everyone else's concerns are," says Lewis-Harris, "and what others are proud of with regard to treatment, or if treatment needs to be changed." She also calls the parents' attorneys every week to two weeks to update them, and sees them regularly at court. She lets them know how treatment is going,

One Mother's Story

Mandy* became Yolanda Lewis-Harris' client two months after her children were taken into child protective services' (CPS) custody. Mandy was addicted to meth and was a victim of domestic violence. Her five children, whose ages ranged from six to 15, were placed in out-of-home care (three with relatives and two with nonrelative foster parents), due to Mandy's allegedly being under the influence of meth while caring for them. When Mandy's attorney first brought Ms. Lewis-Harris into Mandy's life Mandy was participating in services including substance abuse treatment, individual and family counseling and domestic violence counseling, but was not motivated to complete treatment because she felt she had no support from her treatment program or the family's Department caseworker. She also needed help finding housing and a stable income; both court requirements for getting her children back.

During the first two months they worked together, Lewis-Harris visited Mandy at home one to two times per week and spoke to her by phone every other day. Lewis-Harris made sure Mandy was following through with her services, helped her apply for TANF funds, and spent hours looking at apartments with her. She also coordinated with Mandy's family preservation caseworker so the family would receive the services it needed, without duplicating efforts.

After one month, Mandy found a two-bedroom apartment she could afford. Shortly before she moved in, the Department decided that the relatives the three youngest children were living with were no longer good placement options and gave Mandy physical custody, while retaining legal custody. Lewis-Harris worked with Mandy to quickly enroll the children in a new school, and helped her make sure that they had transportation to all of the family's services.

*Not her real name.

and discusses barriers or issues that have come up, successes to highlight, and what the client wants the attorney to advocate for. She also attends all court hearings unless she has a schedule conflict.

Charting the Future

The 4th Judicial District's family reunification project, including Lewis-Harris' work, is being evaluated by American Humane and they expect to report their findings this fall. James Hustad, the court facilitator for the district, says that anecdotally the success rate for Lewis-Harris' cases appear to be similar to the success rate for the family treatment drug court. Yet assigning Lewis-Harris to a case costs only \$1,200, while the drug court costs \$30,000 per case. Lewis-Harris' successful cases also appear to be

reaching reunification more quickly than the successful family treatment drug court cases do. Due to the potential cost savings and faster outcomes of having a social worker assist respondent parents' attorneys, the courts have asked the legislature to fund three new social worker positions, and believe their request will be granted. Also, although the project now serves only substance abusing parents, Lewis-Harris believes this model could help other special populations, such as nonresident fathers, who are often difficult to engage in child welfare cases and would benefit from the additional support and services.

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