Dena Garzone might be one of the coolest peer support specialists and recovery coaches out there. She rides a Harley, has bleach blonde hair, and, according to her supervisor, “is a force to be reckoned with.” After losing custody of her son due to her battles with addiction, Dena dedicated her life to helping mothers recover from addiction so they can restore their families. Dena is a trailblazer, the founder of a program called Moms Matter which establishes support groups for mothers who have children in the child welfare system. Dena empowers women, helping them find their strength and resilience to overcome addiction, make positive choices, and reunify their families.

Through Moms Matter, these women gain community, resources, education, and hope. Dena explains that families in the child welfare system are often survivors of cyclical poverty, domestic violence, or poor education. Parents need support and high-quality information and counsel to navigate the incredibly complex child welfare system and to overcome the significant barriers that so many of them face. The goal of Moms Matter is reunification, and the support groups achieve this through ensuring that mothers successfully complete treatment plans, cultivating life skills to help break the cycle of generational poverty, and educating parents about their rights. Since the founding of Moms Matter in 2016, Dena has helped 25 mothers reunify.

By: Katie Carden, Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law, J.D. Candidate 2021
What made you interested in child welfare? What various roles or positions have you had within the child welfare system?

I became involved in the child welfare system because I lost custody of my four-year-old son to his dad because of my struggles with addiction. Although, I didn’t lose custody through the child welfare system, I still lost the right to care for my child. No matter how or why you lose custody, it is always devastating and traumatic. I am now in long-term recovery, but I never regained custody of my son. I understand what it feels like to have your child forcibly removed from your care.

I started Moms Matter with David White, the founder of the non-profit Fostering Great Ideas (FGI), an organization dedicated to improving the lives of children in foster care. I first met David at a charity event, he asked me if there was anything that I could do for moms involved in the child welfare system. Immediately, because of my background, I thought of the first thing I know that helps – starting a group. I put together this support group called Moms Matter. The focus of this program is reunification – and we achieve this through helping moms recover from addiction or substance abuse issues. I think Moms Matter works because I’m a peer. I am in recovery; I have lost custody of a child. I am part of the community that I serve and advocate for. I want children to be the happiest that they can be, and I believe that is with their parents. It’s not always possible, but it often is. The most important thing to do is to change mindsets and treat reunification like it is the desired goal and outcome.

How does Moms Matter work?

In order to participate in our Moms Matter group, you must have an open case in either foster care or kinship care. When moms first enter into the group, I focus on the treatment plans. We prioritize and organize that plan. When parents enter into the child welfare system there is so much trauma, this trauma leads to an inability to process information, confusion, and it is just all so overwhelming. At Moms Matter, we break down the court-ordered treatment plans that moms most follow to reunify. We analyze and figure out everything that needs to be done to successfully follow this plan. In group, we make sure these moms have all the necessary documentation, we figure out what paperwork they need to gather and go over how to fill out that paperwork, we determine what meetings are available to them, and the transportation available to get to those meetings.

When we first established Moms Matter, we set up a referral system with South Carolina Department of Social Services (DSS). In the beginning, most of the referrals came from caseworkers. I would also invite moms I knew in the community to be in the group. Getting people involved was tricky in the beginning. I’ve worked in the sales industry for years and it reminded me of that. You know, you need to speak to ten people before you get two to show up for group. So, it started with case worker referrals and as time went on, I was invited to family group conferences. National Youth Advocate Program of South Carolina started inviting me to their meetings and referring moms to my program. I now receive referrals from guardian ad litems, attorneys, foster parents, and treatment centers. I worked hard to get out in the community and let people know about Moms Matter, and that helped me create some great community relationships.

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
Right now, there are Moms Matter groups in four counties in South Carolina. Most recently, we’ve started a group in Colorado. I serve as the group facilitator for three of the counties in South Carolina and I’ve extensively trained the other facilitators, because the facilitator is such a critical role.

**Can you tell me about the success of Moms Matter and why you believe it’s successful?**

I’ve had a 99% success rate of reunification with the moms in my group. There is only one mom I worked with who did not reunify, and I think that’s because she did not attend group regularly. Moms Matter is so successful because these moms are meeting and working with other mothers who have all been through this system, who have been in the same shoes and the same place. This puts the women at ease. In order to successfully reunify, you need hope. These moms develop hope by seeing other women who are going through the same thing they are. Additionally, moms in our group are at different stages in their reunification process. There are moms who still come to group after reunification, and that is so powerful for the new members to see. The new moms meet with other women who struggled with addiction, who struggled with the child welfare system, and who were able to come out on top and get their kids back. In my mind, group is and should always be ongoing.

We work to make sure group is available for everyone who wants to participate. Sometimes these women get new jobs or their schedule changes, they might have other treatment plan requirements or drug or parenting classes on the same day. Usually we can work something out to ensure that the moms can attend weekly meetings. If a mom is attending regularly, I’ll send her caseworkers a monthly report documenting that this mother is coming to group regularly, she’s participating, and is on track for reunification. I always make sure to let the caseworkers know of these women’s efforts.

We all share any information or resources we have. It’s a team effort and we’re all supporting each other. Moms Matter is totally voluntary, but these moms are willing to go above and beyond what’s “required” of them and do whatever it takes to reunify.

**Describe some of the efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?**

We are in the process of writing a handbook for families who are navigating the child welfare system. It’s undergoing its first edits right now, but we’re hoping to circulate it in South Carolina and then be able to push it outside of South Carolina, too. When a parent enters the system, his or her first question is “what do I do?”. The purpose of this handbook is to answer every potential question a new parent in the system might have. I am so specific. I include information about your attitude and behavior, the tone of your voice, and what you should/shouldn’t be wearing. I explain all of the meetings and merit hearings – their procedures and what they all mean. This handbook will help families navigate this process and better understand this incredibly confusing and complicated system.

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I also teach a 13-week curriculum in life parenting and recovery skills at a treatment facility for women and children, Serenity Place. Over half of the women in this curriculum have open child welfare cases. My goal is always to keep children safe, and these moms can keep their children safe, they just need to learn real lifestyle changes to make this happen. But they’re not going to learn these lifestyle changes if they don’t have critical information and education. When I teach my curriculum, I go through everything – including the law enforcement steps. I make sure these moms know their rights and the standards of abuse and neglect that Child Protective Services must find to remove children from their homes. I teach about the health and the history of addiction. We discuss the importance of boundaries and organizational skills. We really talk about all kinds of things, this is an all-inclusive curriculum.

FGI and I are trying to get my curriculum to a place where we can teach it online. The moms at the treatment facility love it. Of all the programs at Serenity Place, it’s consistently received the highest grade for teaching life skills. In the hopes of getting this curriculum published, we have been keeping data at FGI measuring the number of moms who participated in this program and successfully reunified.

I incorporate a lot of my curriculum into the Moms Matter groups. Obviously, in Moms Matter the primary focus is reunification and we focus on completing the treatment plans that the women must follow to reunify. But we definitely touch on life skills and parenting lessons in group. Group is more fluid and it's just a longer process.

Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? What are they?

There is this misconceived notion that the foster care system is a fast track to adoption, and some foster parents and parents think that. There may be a huge “us against them” mentality between parents and foster parents. We must work to dismantle that idea and try to cultivate partnerships between parents and foster parents. I have brought foster moms in to talk at group, and it’s been some of the best, most intense meetings. I brought Hope to group, a young woman who aged out of foster care, to explain to the moms what it's like to be in foster care and what it’s like when your mom doesn’t come to visit. There is a misconception of foster care and that all foster parents will be able to adopt the children they're caring for. Moms need to know that this is not true – not all foster parents want to adopt their children and the department’s goal for these families is reunification.

What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding conditions that may lead to foster care?

I am very passionate about education. We need to educate vulnerable families living in poverty and the broader public. There can be a mindset of “us versus them” between poor families and the department, a survival mindset and a very distrustful one. These women are not as likely to reach out for help before something like this happens, because they’re afraid that if they reach out for help, they may be put on “notice” by the department and their kids will be taken away. We must educate women of their resources, what their rights are, what the law is. When I’m working with the public (with lawyers, GALS, case workers, family group conferences), I’m always pointing out how people like us love our children,
but we live in constant survival mode. And when you live in survival mode, the way you show love for your children might look different than how other people show love. Our love for our families is just as strong, but it might be perceived as cold and uncaring, even though that is far from the truth. We need to educate the public on what it’s like living in survival mode, living paycheck to paycheck. We need to educate so that we can all better understand each other.

I think many people may stigmatize mental health issues. Poor people may be quite willing to go to a welfare office to get food stamps but not for mental health treatment. Unfortunately, the stress of living paycheck to paycheck, of living in constant survival mode, leads to mental health and substance abuse issues. These poor parents may be afraid to admit they’re depressed, that they’re drinking too much, or that they’re struggling with their kids who are acting out of control. If reaching out for help for these things were normalized, then that would be the most effective in preventing families from entering the child welfare system. I know how it feels to look at my three-year-old who is cowering under me as I’m standing over him screaming at the top of my lungs. I knew that I needed help, but I was too afraid to tell anyone because I knew that might lead to the removal of my child. Parents are so afraid that their kids will be removed if they ask for help, if they admit that they’re struggling, but that's not true. We love our kids so intensely because we know the tight rope that we’re walking to keep them.

**What is one thing you recommend in working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?**

It is very important to try to establish a relationship between foster parents and parents. There needs to be a partnership towards the shared goal of reunification. I’m a firm believer that moms and families must be held accountable. Many of the families who enter the system don’t understand that family court is different from criminal because the only interaction they’ve had with the courts is through criminal court. In family court, it’s not about defending yourself, it’s about being accountable, being honest and open to change. We must work to help parents change their mindset and be accountable for their behaviors. It’s not okay to by hysterical or blame everyone else, I don’t put up with that.

To all the caseworkers and professionals who work within the child welfare system, I recommend keeping an open mind. Meet people where they are and not at your expectations of them. I work a faith-based program, I have faith in the women I work with. I have all the faith and confidence in the world that they can do this. I think that helps people stay accountable.

Everyone needs to stop using the term “birth parent” or “biological mother/father”. There is already is a differentiator, foster parent, the use of “birth mom” is not needed. Why are you renaming these parents? Why are you taking away their identity? Every handbook I read uses that term and it’s like chewing on tinfoil.
What are some of the biggest challenges facing parents when they're trying to reunify with their children?

Most of the clientele are dealing with poverty and poor education. Our community is lacking in resources. Something that is extremely problematic is the lack of transportation. We are not a big city – you can't hop on a bus and get somewhere quickly. There is no reliable public transportation, no conducive busline. Lots of people just don’t have transportation and this, of course, keeps people stuck in poverty.

We need drivers with regular routes so people can make their appointments. We’d love to tap into a volunteer base of drivers, maybe set up vans, like the churches do, to pick people up and take them to their group meetings, parenting classes, treatment programs, etc. Lack of transportation is one of the real roadblocks for a lot of the moms in my program, the difficulty in simply getting to places they have to be.

What is one piece of advice that you give to the moms you are working with?

Your behavior and attitude are so important. That covers a whole lot of things – defensiveness, lying, being aggressive - these are survival instincts that will not be tolerated within the child welfare system. You can ruin everything just with a bad attitude, and right from the get-go. Focusing on your behavior and attitude is the hardest thing to do in the middle of a traumatic crisis. But I hammer that home all the time.

Also, I really stress the idea that this is a process. If your kids were taken from you on Monday, they’re likely not coming home on Wednesday. A lot of times this is the first time these women are bumping into something that they can’t manipulate, run from, or bully their way through. This process is not going to happen quickly. Getting these women to accept that it is a process, but that reunification will happen if they do the right thing. Your kids will come home if you put in the work. And part of that work is focusing on behavior and attitude, making sure you do not become hysterical, unreasonable, manic.

What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, or governors about improving the system?

The bottom line is that if we are doing this for the children and the children are the main concern, there is not one child born who would not like to be with their parent. So, we should go to any length necessary to make that possible. It just goes back to that push for reunification, we need to have everyone on board with the idea that reunification is always the ideal outcome. All children want their parents, sometimes they just want them to be better parents. No child wants to be raised by a village, they want to be raised by their parents. It may take a village to help keep a family together, but not to raise a child. Kids want their Mommy and Daddy, period.

Do you have an example of a parent who persevered to reunify with her children?

Yes, check out this clip on our website about Nicole - https://youtu.be/tg0VZ-waSYM. Nicole is a reunification Rockstar who started attending Moms Matter in 2017!