Planning a Successful Family Reunification Event

By Jey Rajaraman, Supervising Attorney, Family Representation Project, Legal Services of New Jersey

Children played and parents fought back tears of joy. An audience of over 100, including child welfare caseworkers, resource parents, attorneys for parents and children, judges, and service providers, watched and smiled.

On June 27, 2011, Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) held the state’s second annual Family Reunification Day, recognizing and honoring the success of numerous stakeholders in reuniting families involved in the child welfare system. The event, part of a National Reunification Month celebration supported by the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, Casey Family Programs, the National Center for Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the National Association of Counsel for Children and others, was held at the Law Center in New Brunswick, NJ. LSNJ honored individual families and members of the legal, advocacy, and child welfare communities for their continued dedication to family preservation and reunification.

As we plan our June 2012 Family Reunification event, I look back to the previous two annual events and ask what made them successful. In answering this question, I think of where it all began. At our first event in 2010, we honored a parent, maybe ironically named, Hope. Hope was married homemaker and mother of two girls, ages 8 and 10. Hope was faced with several challenges. Like so many parents, she was trying to take care of her family, while also protecting them from the fact she was being abused by her alcoholic husband. Along with the abuse, Hope’s family was in financial crisis and would soon be homeless. In attempting to support her family, Hope wrote several bad checks which led to her arrest and incarceration. While Hope was serving time in an all-women’s prison, the state child welfare agency became involved with her family due to allegations of abuse or neglect resulting from her husband’s alcoholism. The children were ultimately removed; and placed several times prior to being placed in a pre-adoptive home.

On paper, reviewing this case, one would not be hopeful. It appeared likely that this case would result in a termination of Hope’s parental rights. A superficial review of the file indicated a mother who was incarcerated without a release date and a father unwilling to seek services and comply with court orders. In reality, Hope was active in services offered by her prison, including taking every parenting class available, and making sure that the programs complied with the child welfare agency’s service plan. As her attorneys, we made several applications to have the girls placed with Hope’s family, increase contact and parenting time. Two years after their removal, the girls were ultimately placed with a resource parent who wanted to adopt them. The girls were clear about what they wanted: they wanted to be home with mommy. When the resource mother realized that Hope was a loving mother who was willing to do anything for them, she supported Hope and in fact facilitated parenting time between Hope and her daughters. After Hope was released from prison on a reentry program, services continued
and visits were increased. Hope had an entire team behind her. The team consisted of the child welfare agency, the resource parent, the legal advocates and the court system committed to Hope being successfully reunified with her girls. We all banded together to make this reunification work. And it did. Hope now owns her home and a business and her girls love soccer and dancing.

So this is where a successful Reunification Event begins - with a story of an actual reunification. Although reunification is the ultimate goal of all child welfare cases, it is often very difficult to achieve. Diverse forms of support, including adequate legal representation, are necessary to reach this goal. Family Reunification Day is intended to raise awareness of these difficulties and promote future reunification successes.

In New Jersey, our event not only consists of honoring the parents, service providers and other Reunification Day heroes, but also includes a panel presentation of experts. These experts range from parent advocates to judges to service providers who present on what elements are needed and what works towards a successful reunification. Our first year, we focused on how resource parents can be a key component to achieve reunification. When resource parents are included in the reunification process, and meet and form a relationship with the parents, the chances for a successful reunification will be significantly improved. Last year, experts presented on services and safety nets for parents and how specific services will target the issues in a more effective way. We knew the event was a success both years when we heard overwhelmingly positive feedback from not only the reunified families in attendance but the various child welfare stakeholders as well.

Below are tips for planning a Family Reunification event.

The ABA National Reunification Month website has other tools that you may find helpful. 
http://www.americanbar.org/groups/child_law/projects_initiatives/nrd.html

Tips:

• Create a committee for planning this event. The committee should include individuals with various types of expertise - child welfare to media and grant experts. Meet early with your event planning committee
  o Identify the type of event you want (panel discussion, educational, picnic or hybrid)
  o Start the nomination process for families and other individuals that you want to honor on the event day.
    ▪ If you have a nomination process, send out those forms out early
• Identify a theme for your event
  o If you want to focus on services, parental engagement or appropriate services. After choosing your theme, this will assist you in picking a speaker and tailoring your program.
• Involve your families! We ask input from our parents about the event they would like to attend. We also want to make sure the event is appropriate for their children along with it be educational and interesting for all the child welfare stakeholders.

Artwork by Shante Bullock