

From the Courthouse to the Statehouse: Parents as Partners in Child Welfare *by Diane Boyd Rauber*

When a child is separated from a parent due to allegations of abuse and/or neglect, the separation is usually sudden. Often the parent is confused about the child welfare process and unclear about the road to reunification. Although the court appoints an attorney to represent the parent, that attorney does not always have the time to explain the process, answer questions, and guide the parent through the services ordered by the court. "Parent partners," who have experienced the system and reunified with their child(ren), are emerging in many communities to guide and support parents involved in the child welfare system. When a well-trained parent partner is involved, the respondent parent can complete the case plan requirements more quickly and the parent's attorney can argue for reunification more effectively.

"Parent partners," also known as "parent advocates," "parent mentors," or "veteran parents," accompany parents to court hearings and agency meetings, help them access services, and encourage them to advocate for themselves. In some instances, a parent partner may go to a family team meeting with the parent right before or after the child is removed (a meeting the parent's attorney is often not permitted or welcomed to attend). Since many child welfare cases involve substance abuse, a parent partner may provide insight and support to a parent new to recovery. As one parent leader in Minnesota noted, having access to a parent partner provides "a place where parents, even in the midst of turmoil, can connect with another parent..... [t]he moment that your child is removed from the home, someone who is there right away."¹

In addition, some state and local programs include veteran parents in policy planning so parents' voices are heard in decisions that affect families in the child welfare system. This involvement goes beyond appointing one "token" parent to participate; rather, these programs recruit and train parents who can participate as equal partners on local and statewide policymaking committees. This article describes several parent partner/advocate programs operating around the country, including programs that train parents to serve as parent mentors and programs that train parent leaders to sit at the decision-making table and influence child welfare policy. Many programs provide both types of training. A second article will discuss how attorneys can work with parent partners and advocates to provide their clients with the best possible representation and address ethical concerns and other challenges.

Center for Family Representation

The Center for Family Representation (CFR), founded in 2004 in New York City, uses the Community Advocacy Team (CAT) approach to serve families. The CAT approach provides each family with a team of professionals to help it navigate its case. The team includes an attorney, social worker, and a parent advocate. CFR has grown significantly since 2004 when it first served 75 families. In 2007, CFR was awarded a contract from the Family Court

in Manhattan to represent families in child protection matters, and served 700 families in 2008.

Parent advocates at CFR are full-time employees who have successfully navigated the child welfare system and reunified with their children. Parent advocates collaborate with the attorney and social worker on the case. They support parents by helping them access services and going with them to court and other meetings.

CFR has compiled impressive statistics. Of the 700 families that received services through the CAT approach:

- ❖ Fifty-six percent of children never entered foster care.
- ❖ The average stay for children who did enter care was 98 days, compared to an average stay of 11.5 months for children in New York City who reunify in one year.
- ❖ Less than one percent of children reenter care, compared to a citywide average of 11.4 percent who reenter care within one year.²

Detroit Center for Family Advocacy (CFA)

Established in 2009 by the University of Michigan (UM) Law School, the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy (CFA)³ works with families to prevent a child's placement into out-of-home care. CFA uses legal tools, such as guardianship, child custody or personal protection orders, and educational advocacy, to help families care for their children without removing them. In addition to empowering families to care for their children, CFA seeks to promote system reform and to provide UM law students and faculty with an opportunity to apply knowledge and conduct research.

Similar to CFR's approach, CFA uses an attorney, social worker, and parent advocate to assist families. The attorney handles legal advocacy, the social worker helps families access services and provides case management, and the parent advocate offers support and advice on navigating the child welfare system. Families are referred primarily from the North Central Children's Services District, with an emphasis on the Osborn community of Detroit.

CFA handles two types of cases. The first type is when a parent or caregiver has been investigated by the child welfare agency and is substantiated for possible child abuse and neglect, and legal assistance to a parent, guardian, custodian, or extended family member will help that person provide a safe and stable home for the child. The second type is where the child is already in foster care, but legal services to the birth parent or other potential permanent caregiver can remove obstacles and allow the child to exit care and return to the birth parent or move into another permanent placement.

Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)

The Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) started in 1994 with a grant from the Child Welfare Fund to the

Hunter College School of Social Work in New York City. CWOP now has offices in the East Harlem, Highbridge, and Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhoods of New York City.

CWOP uses parent mentoring and parent organizing to improve the child welfare system through several primary strategies:

- ❖ **Parent Organizing and Education.** CWOP hosts meetings to educate parents about the child welfare process and teach them how to advocate for themselves: (1) weekly peer-led support and self-help groups; (2) monthly general member meetings focused on a theme of interest to parents, often led by outside experts; and (3) parent organizer/attorney-led parents' rights workshops in substance abuse programs, halfway houses, shelters, etc.⁴
- ❖ **Meaningful Parent Participation.** CWOP ensures parents' voices are heard in a meaningful way, by helping them participate at local and state legislative bodies, professional conferences and education programs, public forums, and through media contact.
- ❖ **Publications.** CWOP works with parents to have their experiences and stories inform internal and external publications, including *The Survival Guide to the NYC Child Welfare System*.
- ❖ **Leadership Curriculum.** CWOP's Parent Leadership Curriculum prepares parents to work at CWOP and public and private agencies as parent advocates.

- ❖ **Center for Family Representation**
www.cfnny.org
- ❖ **Detroit Center for Family Advocacy (CFA)**
<http://www.law.umich.edu/centersandprograms/ccl/cfa/Pages/default.aspx>
- ❖ **Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)**
www.cwop.org
- ❖ **Iowa Parent Partner Program**
www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/Parent_Partner_Program/index.html
- ❖ **Jefferson County Parent Advocate Program**
<http://chfs.ky.gov/dcbs/parentadvocates.htm>
- ❖ **Catalyst for Kids (Washington State)**
www.catalystforkids.org/index.html
- ❖ **California Parent Engagement Center (CPEC)**
www.carentengagement.org
- ❖ **National Coalition for Parent Advocacy in Child Protective Services**
www.parentadvocacy.org/index.html

Jefferson County, Kentucky

The Parent Advocacy Program in Jefferson County, Kentucky started in 2004 when the Annie E. Casey Foundation selected the county as a demonstration site for its Family to Family Initiative.⁵ Parent advocates work with caseworkers to achieve the following goals: (1) work intensely with parents to prevent removal of children from their homes; (2) work instructively with parents to reunify children in a timely manner; (3) work collaboratively with foster parents to maintain family connections; and (4) maintain connections between parents and children while in out-of-home care.⁶ Parent advocates and caseworkers engage parents to participate in case planning, to provide information to parents about foster care and the child welfare system, and support families by providing support, resource linkage, and modeling.⁷

To be an advocate, a parent's Child Protective Services (CPS) case must be closed for at least a year, with no outstanding CPS issues and a stable situation. They must be able to attend meetings and trainings, be willing to share their experience with other parents and CPS staff, and complete 15 hours of training before being paired with a parent. Families assigned an advocate either (1) have children under the age of five; (2) are involved with CPS for the first time; or (3) live in a "high child removal rate" area.⁸ With funding provided through Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky, parent advocates are currently eligible to receive a \$300 monthly stipend for direct service provision to parents, and additional smaller stipends for participation in trainings.

Jefferson County evaluated its program in 2007 and 2008, using data from the Parent Advocacy Program and The Worker Information System (TWIST). The 2007 evaluation showed parent partners performed many tasks, including: (1) encouraging the family to visit with the child; (2) attending team meetings with the family; (3) providing information about services; (4) helping the family find services; (5) transporting the family to services; (6) providing information about the agency to the family; and (7) going to court hearings or agency meetings with the family.⁹ Key evaluation findings included:

- ❖ Children in families receiving parent advocate services had fewer placement moves in their current episode of care, .8 moves v. 1.8 moves, than those who did not receive services.
- ❖ Children in families receiving parent advocate services overall spent less time in care, 10.2 months v. 18.2 months, than those who did not receive services.
- ❖ Children in families receiving parent advocate services had higher percentages of reunification than those not receiving services.
- ❖ Children in families receiving parent advocate services exited to adoption and emancipation less frequently than those not receiving services.¹⁰

Additional data analyzed in 2008 considered an additional 240 families served between September 2005 and April 2008.¹¹ The data showed that parent advocates

served their respective families for an average of 3.76 months.¹² Some other findings included:

- ❖ Of the 250 closed cases, 215 children did not have subsequent CPS referrals; 25 children had a substantiated finding of abuse or neglect within one year.
- ❖ Of the 202 children receiving parent advocate services who left out-of-home care before 2008, 70.3 percent reunified with their parents or relatives. This rate compared to 56.7 percent of children who did not receive parent advocate services.¹³

Iowa

Through its Community Partnerships for Protecting Children (CPPC) and funds from the Annie E. Casey Program, the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) implemented the Parent Partner Approach. Iowa Parent Partners has steadily expanded since its inception to six sites. In July 2009, the Children's Bureau, through the Midwest Child Implementation Center, identified the Iowa Parent Partner Approach as a selected project to facilitate sustainable systems change and build the capacity for improved performance and positive change.

As a result, five new Parent Partner sites began operation in December 2009, for a total of 11 local Parent Partner sites in 31 of Iowa's 99 counties. Another two to four sites will be implemented in October 2010.

Each local Parent Partner site matches a parent partner, who has been involved with the child welfare agency and has been successfully reunited with their child for at least a year and/or have healed from the issues that initially brought them to the attention of DHS, with a parent currently involved in the system. Parent partners are compensated to mentor and help parents find community resources. They commit to working with a family for a minimum of seven to 10 hours per month.

Through the Parent Partner Approach, Iowa aims to (1) influence policy and practice in the state to reflect parents' perspectives; (2) change the agency culture to reflect parents' strengths; (3) reduce rates of reentry into foster care; (4) shorten length of stay; and (5) increase skills and opportunities for parents.¹⁴

A building block of the Iowa Parent Partner Approach is a shared-decision making process that identifies and cultivates partnerships with other agencies, groups, and individuals that endorse the mission and practice of Parent Partners. One such partnership exists with the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (IFAPA).¹⁵

To provide support, experience, and consistency during expansion and implementation, a statewide steering committee with broad representation (Parent Partners, Parent Partner coordinators, Community Partnership, local and state Department of Human Services, AmeriCorps, and IFAPA) meets quarterly. The statewide steering committee, with additional task teams as needed, ensure high quality local and centralized trainings; build the individual and professional skills of Parent Partners, coordinators, and others; and facilitate communication and

peer-to-peer networking across child welfare systems. In addition, the statewide steering committee and other Parent Partner leaders develop and provide policies and protocols to Parent Partner sites, the Department of Human Services, and other partners and providers.

The steering committee and local sites have developed informational and training materials to help implement the approach and achieve these goals. These materials include a tool kit for parent partner coordinators, parent partner job descriptions, and a parent partner pledge.¹⁶

Even though the statewide steering committee provides guidance and statewide consistencies to local sites, each local site structures itself to suit its demographics and needs. For example, each site decides at what point a family is offered a parent partner and might decide to focus their efforts on certain issues, e.g., mentoring families with substance abuse issues or families involved in the system for the first time. Each Iowa site was required to identify \$50,000 in local funds before implementing the Parent Partner Approach. The site receives limited state funds and must supplement those with local funds to sustain itself.

Contra Costa, California

The Contra Costa County Parent Partner Program,¹⁷ now in its sixth year, uses parents who have successfully reunited with their children in three distinct ways:

- ❖ **Parent Leaders.** Parent Partners serve as the "parent's voice" by participating in various committees and policy making groups. For example, Contra Costa's two full-time Parent Partners were the parent's voice on the California Child Family and Services Review Program Improvement Plan.
- ❖ **Parent Advocates.** Parent Partners mentor parents currently involved in the child welfare system, and offer help and support as they navigate the child welfare system. Parent Partners are sent to make initial contact with a parent at the Detention Hearing and offer assistance. Since parents are often asked to participate in a drug or alcohol treatment program, Parent Partners can facilitate the process by providing information about programs. Parent Partners also attend court and Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings, and other meetings as requested. Although Parent Partners are mandated reporters and receive training as such, the program has an agreement with the court that the Parent Partner will not be called on to testify for either the parent or the county.
- ❖ **Parent Trainers.** Parent Partners work with professional staff to co-present material to professional staff (including new caseworkers), parents, foster parents, CASAs, Parent Partner trainees, and other community groups. They regularly sit on focus groups and panel discussions for a variety of county, state, national, staff, and

foster parent groups. The Parent Partner Program also developed a scripted court orientation for parents, family members, and foster parents. The orientation, also available in Spanish, familiarizes parents with the language, systemic processes, and relationships they may encounter. This orientation, which is co-presented by a Parent Partner and a staff member, is offered in the community and various treatment programs.

Contra Costa County employs both full- and part-time Parent Partners. Initially, Parent Partners were contract employees. To enable full-time Parent Partners to have a complete employment experience, however, Contra Costa County offered a contract to the Child Abuse Prevention Council (CAPC) of Contra Costa County. Full-time Parent Partners are now employees of CAPC, and receive a salary, paid holidays, and health care benefits.

In July 2009, the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California at Berkeley published the findings of its study of the Contra Costa County Parent Partner Program.¹⁸ The two-part study, which consisted of a process study and an outcome study, described the program "by identifying components of the program that are beneficial" to parents and other professionals and studied "the relationship between the Parent Partner intervention and reunification outcomes."¹⁹ The process study was comprised of focus groups, telephone and in-person interviews, and parent satisfaction surveys. In the outcome study, the researchers compared data from a group of 236 children whose parents received the services of a Parent Partner after removal between July 2005 and March 2008 with a comparison group of 55 children served by the county in 2004, before the program started.²⁰ Major findings included the following:

- ❖ Parent surveys indicated a high degree of satisfaction with Parent Partner services. "Clients felt supported and informed about their experience with the child welfare agency, and empowered to take control of their circumstances and make needed changes in their lives. They believed that their experience with their Parent Partner gave them a voice in decision making, and helped to support their relationship with their children."²¹
- ❖ Parents who participated in focus groups indicated that the Parent Partner services were useful, particularly regarding the value of shared experiences, communication, and support.
- ❖ In interviews, Parent Partners reported the program was beneficial for them as well. "All of the Parent Partners indicated that they continue to learn new strategies for parenting their own children thoughtfully, that they have grown in confidence through their work, and that their understanding of who they are and what they can achieve is regularly fortified through their role as a Parent Partner."²²

- ❖ Professionals affiliated with the program reported positively about its value.
- ❖ Data indicated that reunification "may be more likely" for families where the parents received Parent Partner services. "Specifically, approximately 60% of children with a Parent Partner reunified with their parents within 12 months of removal, compared to 26% of children whose parents were not served."²³

Washington

There are varied models for direct parent advocacy work being implemented in several counties within Washington State. These include the nationally recognized Parent Partner Program, as well as locally developed Parent to Parent and Community Navigator Programs. Community Navigators increase healthy social connectedness by building natural sustainable supports around families while encouraging parents to advocate for themselves. These programs are operated by different organizations, e.g., the Dependency Court, Children's Administration, and community-based organizations, and offer varying levels of service. The range of services provided includes the following:

- ❖ Outreach by a veteran parent at the Shelter Care Hearing.
- ❖ "Dependency 101" class, led by veteran parents and other stakeholders, to educate parents about the system and introduce them to other families who have successfully navigated the system.
- ❖ Continuing series of classes led by veteran parents on tools, resources, and life skills that can support reunification.
- ❖ Support and social groups to increase socialization and help parents engage in clean and sober activities.
- ❖ One-to-one mentoring and system navigation provided by veteran parents.

While the programs vary in the range and level of services provided, key elements common to each include the following:

- ❖ A veteran parent who is compensated for the work coordinates the program.
- ❖ Additional veteran parents provide services on a stipend and/or voluntary basis.
- ❖ Close collaboration and cooperation among the veteran parents and system stakeholders, including the Juvenile Court, CASA, Office of Public Defense, Assistant Attorney General, and the Department of Children and Family Services.
- ❖ Veteran parents receive strong supervision, oversight, and support from their sponsoring organization.

Training is Key

For a parent partner program to succeed, extensive training is required. Adequate training can address concerns judges

and attorneys may have about involving a parent partner in a case. Training requirements vary, but examples include:

- ❖ Regardless of prior experience, **CFR** requires parent advocates to participate in training for new staff, which is typically about 10 weeks. Each parent advocate is then supervised by a social worker.
- ❖ **CWOP** requires six months of initial training. Parents in the **Jefferson County Parent Advocate Program (KY)** participate in the *Building a Better Future* curriculum.²⁴ This curriculum takes about 15 hours over multiple sessions and is led by a social services professional and a birth parent. The parent partner learns how the child welfare agency works, as well as advocacy and communication skills. A key session explores feelings of grief and loss in parents and children when they are separated.
- ❖ The **Iowa Parent Partner Program** provides about 40 hours of training over a year.²⁵ Parent partners must complete training before they are assigned to a parent. Training includes participating in the *Building a Better Future* curriculum, and supplemental sessions on the child welfare agency, mandatory reporting, and boundaries and ethics. Other sessions that must be completed within one year include mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and family team meetings. Parent partners are provided ongoing training and opportunities to participate in conferences. For example, the Iowa Parent Partner Summit is scheduled for May 2010. This multidisciplinary training event, “Iowa Parent Partner Summit 2010: Breaking Down Walls to Build Better Futures,” is designed for Parent Partners and coordinators, community providers, child welfare staff, and representatives from other states to share best practices, guide implementation, expand knowledge and skills, and build relationships. The Summit is being planned by Parent Partners and coordinators, and will include a wide range of topics. Some of these topics include the following: (1) What is a Mentor: Discussion and Practice for Parent Partner Sites; (2) Your Story Breaks Down Walls; (3) Parent Partner Sites at Work; (4) Engaging Fathers: Techniques and Tools for Dads; (5) Color Your Future Fantastic: Learn What Color You Are and How It Impacts Your Success; (6) Bad Apples: How to Deal with Negative Attitudes; (7) Family Drug Court in Rural Settings; (8) Parent Partners and FTM: Putting Together Strong Family Team Meetings with Parent Partners; and (9) Building a Foundation: How to Start the Parent Partner Approach in Your Community. In addition to the Summit, regular peer learning opportunities are available. The Peer Learning Team is a permanent extension of the statewide steering committee and is led by a Parent Partner. The

Parent Partner and task team are responsible for coordinating and facilitating three seminar calls and three local peer exchange visits every year.

- ❖ The **Contra Costa County (California) Parent Partner Program** provides a County Organizational Overview and Mandated Reporter training. In addition, Contra Costa County provides training on the following topics: (1) Program Overview; (2) TDM Readiness; (3) Family Engagement; (4) Establishing Effective Boundaries; (5) Partnering for a Brighter Future; (6) CalWorks; (7) Before You Go Out There; (8) Court Training; and (9) Presentation Skills.
- ❖ Training is an essential part of parent advocacy work in **Washington State**. Basic training for Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) members includes 16 hours of training in the following areas: (1) the child welfare system and child welfare law; (2) advocacy, including personal, peer, and legal advocacy; (3) legislative advocacy skills; (4) cultural understanding; (5) child welfare best practices; and (6) strategies and purposes for sharing personal stories. Training for veteran parents involved in parent outreach and education varies within the level of responsibility assumed by the parent. Regardless of the program, training for all individuals involved in this work includes program requirements and expectations, understanding and maintaining appropriate boundaries, and group leadership. Veteran parents working one-to-one with parents as mentors or navigators require more comprehensive training and supervision. For example, training for parents serving in the Vancouver, Washington Parent Partner Program parallels the rigorous Parent Partner training used in Iowa.

In addition to training parents to help other parents one on one, other programs train them to be involved on the decision-making level and empower them to speak out for their rights, and advocate for child welfare reforms.

California State Parent Team

California is working to involve parents in major policymaking decisions. The California State Parent Team grew out of the 1996 revisions to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) requiring meaningful parent engagement in child abuse prevention. Since 1999, the California Department of Social Services, Office of Child Abuse Prevention, has contracted with Parents Anonymous® to create the California State Parent Team (CSPT). The CSPT includes parent leaders who partner with parents, professionals, and policymakers. CSPT members serve on committees and task forces to help parents engage in planning, implementing, and evaluating family support and child welfare services statewide. Parents Anonymous® provides recruitment, training, mentoring, stipends, and ongoing support to the CSPT. The CSPT focuses on five major initiatives:²⁶

❖ **California Parent Engagement Center (CPEC)**, www.cparentengagement.org. This online resource shares parent engagement program strategies, promotes using evidence-based programs and strategies, and contains Web site links, publications, articles, and tool kits. Parent advocacy programs and research highlighted in FY 2010 include the review and classification of different service models, data collection efforts, and training materials. Parents Anonymous® Inc. also established a State Advisory Committee, composed of representatives of child welfare, mental health, child abuse prevention, parents, the Tribal Community, Family Resource Centers, funders, and other key stakeholders to provide overall guidance on the work of the CPEC. CPEC has an online application process, maintains searchable database by county and topic areas, maintains an online network, and implements effective dissemination approaches. The *Parent Engagement Program - Data Summary Report*²⁷ was made available in January 2010. This data represents a clear paradigm shift, where parents/caregivers are empowered to create change in themselves and systems designed to strengthen families and communities.

❖ **California Child Welfare Council (CWC)**. Established through state legislation, the CWC brings two branches of government together to make policy recommendations to improve the foster care system, and includes a Parent Leader from the California State Parent Team: California Health and Human Services Agency and the Judicial Council of California. As a member of the Permanency Committee, the Parent Leader has advocated for reunification as the primary goal when developing policy recommendations. The Permanency Committee is addressing the structure and resources needed to ensure that (1) children and youth in foster care are able to maintain and develop permanent connections with relatives and other important individuals in their lives that will be in place after court involvement and (2) the length of time children are in foster care is reduced as a result of the identification of these permanent connections. Parent advocates who have successfully reunited with their children are best equipped to implement evidence-based family finding and engagement efforts in California counties, in partnership with birth parents involved with the child welfare agency. The CWC will be piloting innovative strategies to keep children connected to family no matter what the age of the children or youth.

❖ **Annual Statewide Parent Leadership Conference**. In its third year, the February 2010 conference, cosponsored by Parents Anonymous®, the CSPT, and the Department of Social Services, shared best practices around parent engagement,

and drew over 400 parents, judges, attorneys, and agency staff. The conference brings together parent advocates, practitioners from various systems (e.g., child welfare, mental health, juvenile justice, education, and early childhood development), parents/caregivers, policy makers, and community providers in a statewide forum. The goals of the conference include the following: (1) increase awareness of Parent Leadership strategies, models, and resources; (2) increase knowledge, skills, and abilities on Parent Leadership and Shared Leadership strategies; (3) showcase Parent Leadership and Shared Leadership programs from local areas, exhibit products, and disseminate information; (4) promote establishment of evidence-based/evidence-informed local Parent Leadership models; (5) provide resources to strengthen existing Parent Leadership models; (6) improve evaluation of Parent Leadership programs and strategies; and (7) expand opportunities for parents/caregivers to participate in meaningful leadership activities.

❖ **Parent Engagement Curriculum for Child Welfare Workers**. This curriculum, to be developed by CSPT members and Parents Anonymous® staff during 2010 – 2011, will be implemented at all regional training academies.

❖ **Wraparound Parent Partner**. Parents Anonymous® and CSPT established a statewide advisory committee that developed a role description and fidelity tool (that has been pilot tested), and is planning a study to measure the

National Coalition for Parent Advocacy in Child Protective Services. Parents Anonymous® Inc. and the National Center on Shared Leadership have started the National Coalition. Its mission is "[t]o mobilize parents/caregivers and advocacy organizations to create positive public policy and program changes that prevent removal of children from their families by child protective services, strengthen and ensure the rights of families whose children have been removed, and return children to their families." The Coalition has drafted a Birth Parents' Bill of Rights, including 15 distinctive rights. Some rights are already included in federal law while others are considered best practice in certain states. These rights include the parent's rights to:

- know why they are being investigated,
- an emergency hearing within 24 hours,
- speak and be heard at every step of the process,
- privacy, and
- "see and communicate with their child every day while their child is in care, at times and locations that are convenient to the parent and at no cost to the parent."

The Coalition aims to have this Bill of Rights become part of state and federal laws that improve the child welfare system.

impact of the Parent Partner on outcomes for families in Wraparound programs in child welfare agencies, including clinical results, reunification, and support for families.

Washington State Parent Advocacy Committee (WSPAC)

Developed in 2007 by veteran parents, Catalyst for Kids, and Casey Family Programs,²⁸ the Washington State Parent Advocacy Committee (WSPAC) calls upon birth parents to advocate for strengthening the child welfare system and supporting family reunification. Activities include educating legislators, policymakers, and the public on key issues and systemic barriers for families.²⁹ Policies prioritized by WSPAC members include housing for child welfare families, background checks, and gender equality in service access.

There are 25 WSPAC members including both veteran parents, who are in the majority and are the only decision makers, and staff/allies. Veteran parent members are diversified by gender, race/ethnicity, region, and presenting issues. All have had their case closed for at least one year, have resolved and taken personal responsibility for their role in the dependency, and want to collaborate with other system stakeholders to improve outcomes for children and families. Staff/ally members represent different organizations within the child welfare system. Staff/allies provide advice, mentorship, and resources. WSPAC's success is a function of the fact that veteran parents and staff/allies each value and respect the skills and experiences that the other brings to the table.

Catalyst for Kids also provides technical assistance and support in the development of local Parent Advocacy Committees. Modeled after the WSPAC, there are currently local PACs in eight Washington State communities. Local PACs serve as the core of veteran parent involvement in a community and members take on diverse parent advocacy activities in which there is parent and community interest and capacity. Local PACs provide a pool of veteran parents who are trained and prepared to serve on local advisory and policy committees, and they are frequently called upon to serve in this capacity.

Conclusion

When parent partners and mentors are involved with parents from the beginning of a child welfare case, parents get the support and knowledge they need to navigate the system and improve their chances of achieving reunification. Parent partners relate to parents in a way that no other person in the case can by sharing their experiences and successes. Evaluations of CFR and Jefferson County's programs show that using a parent advocate improves case outcomes. For attorneys representing parents in the child welfare system, a well-trained parent advocate is a valuable addition to a case.

In addition, several states and local jurisdictions realize an important group has been missing from the policymaking process. These jurisdictions now recruit and train parent leaders to sit at the decision-making table. Parent leaders bring a long silent voice in the child welfare system - those of the parents whose lives and children are at

the center of the case.

Diane Boyd Rauber, MEd, JD, is a consultant for the ABA Center on Children and the Law and the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Legal and Judicial Issues. She has co-authored or edited numerous ABA publications, including *A Judge's Guide: Making Child-Centered Decisions in Custody Cases* and *Representing Parents in Child Welfare Cases*.

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¹ Telephone interview with Danisa Farley, St. Paul, Minnesota, September 8, 2008.

² Center for Family Representation. "Community Advocacy Teams - Common Sense Approach Yields Uncommon Results." *Family Matters*, Winter 2009.

<www.cfrny.org/pdf/newsletter_winter09.pdf>

³ Information about the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy can be found at <http://www.law.umich.edu/centersandprograms/ccl/cfa/Pages/default.aspx>. See also Duquette, Donald N., Frank E. Vandervort, and Vivek S. Sankaran. *Detroit Center for Family Advocacy: An Innovative Model to Reduce the Number of Children in Foster Care*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Law School, 2007.

<[www.law.umich.edu/centersandprograms/ccl/calc/Bergstrom/Documents/Detroit%20Center%20for%20Family%20Advocacy%20\(8-29-07\)1.doc](http://www.law.umich.edu/centersandprograms/ccl/calc/Bergstrom/Documents/Detroit%20Center%20for%20Family%20Advocacy%20(8-29-07)1.doc)>

⁴ Child Welfare Organizing Project. *Current Programs and Accomplishments*. <www.cwop.org>.

⁵ The Family to Family Initiative emphasizes four core strategies: (1) building community partnerships; (2) team decision making; (3) resource family recruitment, development, and support; and (4) self-evaluation. For more information about The Annie E. Casey Foundation Family to Family Initiative, see [www.aecf.org/Major Initiatives/Family%20to%20Family.aspx](http://www.aecf.org/Major%20Initiatives/Family%20to%20Family.aspx).

⁶ Commonwealth of Kentucky, Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Department for Community Based Services. *Jefferson County Parent Advocate Program Handbook*. Jefferson County, Kentucky, 2010, 5.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Commonwealth of Kentucky, Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Department for Community Based Services. *Parent Advocacy Program Evaluation*. Jefferson County, Kentucky, June 11, 2007, 8. The evaluation notes that the sample size of the parent advocate families (63) was considerably smaller than the other referral families (3034). Therefore, the results "should be reviewed as preliminary" and "interpreted cautiously." Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 14 - 16.

¹¹ Lianekhammy, Joann and Ruth Huebner. *Parent Advocate Program Evaluation Outcomes for Families Served in Jefferson County September 2005 to April 2008*. Jefferson County, Kentucky, August 21, 2008, 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Telephone Interview with Kyla Marsden, Iowa Parent Partner State Coordinator, August 14, 2009.

¹⁵ The IFAPA training consultant approached Parent Partners about developing and providing training to help resource parents work more effectively with birthparents. Ten Parent Partners wrote the curriculum and were IFAPA-approved to provide the training entitled, "Breaking Barriers." The training is offered regularly around the state and facilitated by a Parent Partner and a resource parent. The training identifies and extinguishes common stereotypes and provides resource parents practical

skills on how to break down barriers and co-parent children in the system.

¹⁶ See

www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/Parent_Partner_Program/index.html.

¹⁷ At the February 2010 Parent Leadership Conference held in Ontario, California, the Contra Costa Parent Partner Program received the Parent Leadership Program Award for its "exceptional work in engaging Parent Leaders in its program," and "the effectiveness of its one-on-one support and mentoring model for parents." <www.ehsd.org/ehs/pdfs/ENews-Feb2010.pdf>

¹⁸ Anthony, Elizabeth K., Jill Duerr Berrick, Ed Cohen, and Elizabeth Wilder. *Partnering with Parents: Promising Approaches to Improve Reunification Outcomes for Children in Foster Care*. Berkeley, CA: Center for Social Services Research, School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley, July 2009.

<panetwork.parentsanonymous.org/aspx5/docs/Final_Report_UC_Berkeley_2009_Evaluation_of_Contra_Costa_Parent_Parners.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid., 3.

²⁰ Ibid., 3 - 4.

²¹ Ibid., 4.

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The work of the Washington State Parent Advocacy Committee, as well as many other parent partner programs across the country, draws from the Casey Family Programs Better Together Model. The Annie E. Casey Foundation recruited individuals in 2003 to develop this parent advocacy program and training curriculum. Jimenez, Sandra and Naomi Weinstein. *Building a Better Future*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004.

²⁵ Information about the various parts of the Iowa training regimen can be found at

www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/Parent_Partner_Program/index.html.

²⁶ Telephone interview with Leah Davis, California State Parent Team member, and Lisa Pion-Berlin, Ph.D., President and CEO, Parents Anonymous® Inc., August 31, 2009.

²⁷

<panetwork.parentsanonymous.org/aspx5/docs/CPEC_Data_Summary_Report.pdf>

²⁸ For more information about the Casey Family Programs Better Together Model, see

www.casey.org/Resources/Initiatives/BetterTogether.

²⁹ Washington State Parent Advocacy Committee. *Washington State Parent Advocacy Committee (WSPAC) Membership Responsibilities*. Seattle WA: Catalyst for Kids, 2009, fn 1.