



National Judicial Opioid Task Force

Parent Partner Programs – *Promising Practice to Keep Families Struggling with Substance Use Disorder Together*

What are Parent Partners?

Parent partners, known by a number of different titles (e.g., parent mentors, parents for parents, veteran parents, parent allies), are parents with previous direct experience in the child welfare system who assist parents currently involved or at risk of becoming involved with the child welfare system. These programs can be court-based, within child welfare agencies, part of law offices, or independent. All provide support to parents navigating the child welfare system through parents who have successfully done so in the past. Research of these programs to date indicate that they can improve reunification outcomes and foster increased trust and confidence in the child welfare and juvenile court systems.

Why Parent Partners?

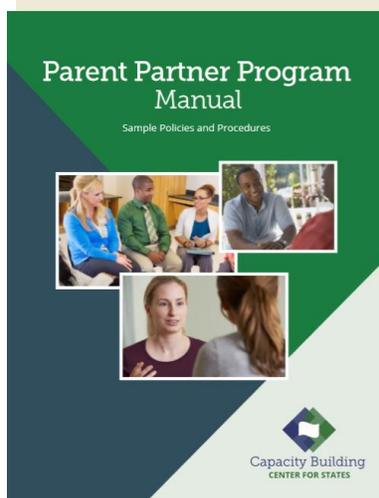
Parents involved in the child welfare and juvenile dependency court systems are often terrified and overwhelmed, especially at the beginning of cases when their children may have been removed into kinship or foster care. The myriad of court and social work professionals they encounter may not have the time to adequately convey an understanding of the system and what parents need to do to reunify their family. A recent study found that more than half the parents surveyed after dependency court hearings did not know the name of the hearing they had just attended.

Parent partners provide peer support and mentorship to parents who are almost all suffering some level of trauma. Parents naturally engage more easily with someone who has been through the system themselves and can model the potential for success. In one interaction described by

a parent partner, the client parent reacted to a piece of advice by saying, “You don’t know what I’m going through.... Wait. You do know what I’m going through!” Peers can thus engage parents and influence them to invest in treatment and services in ways that social workers, attorneys, and judicial officers often cannot. In

addition, parent partners can use their own experiences in the system to draw out the parents’ voice so they can better advocate for themselves in the complex child welfare and juvenile court systems.

In addition to benefitting the parents served and amplifying their voice within the court and child welfare agency, parent partner programs also provide important benefits to the veteran parents themselves. Once viewed as victims, or worse, they are transformed into respected paraprofessionals whose opinions are sought out by caseworkers, attorneys, and judges.



Learn the core competencies of an effective Parent Partner and how they receive comprehensive training:

<https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/gateway/Blob/107662.pdf?w=+NATIVE%28%27recno%3D107662%27%29&upp=0&rpp=10&r=1&m=1>

Program Snapshot: Washington State’s Court-Based Parents for Parents Program

The Children’s Home Society of Washington’s Parents for Parents Program began in Pierce County over ten years ago. A parent who had been through the child

welfare system and managed to keep her children out of foster care teamed with a guardian ad litem to found the program with seed funding from the Court Improvement Program. Their goal was to offer parents information to demystify the dependency court process and provide ongoing support throughout their case. The program has three key components:

- Engagement at the first court hearing – a parent partner, called a Parent Ally in this program,

connects with parents at the first court hearing and all hearings thereafter;

- Dependency 101 – all parents are offered a 2-hour parent-led class explaining the dependency process, what parents can expect to unfold in court, and what they need to do to reunify with their children.
- Follow-Up Support – parent allies offer guidance, advice, and advocacy throughout the case, including mentoring and support over the phone.



Watch one Parent Partner's Story:
<https://youtu.be/l3r5y85gRO4>

Based upon the program's success at engaging parents and increasing family reunification, the Washington Legislature approved legislation in 2015 to provide funding for existing programs and expand into new counties. Currently, 13 counties (out of 39) in Washington have implemented the Parents for Parents Program and two counties in Arizona have adopted the model.

Program Snapshot: Iowa's Child Welfare Agency-Based Parent Partner Approach

Iowa's Parent Partner Program is administered by the state Department of Human Services through its Community Partnership for Protecting Children. Starting with a patchwork of state and local funding in a few counties, Iowa now has over 150 parent partners mentoring across the state. Each local parent partner site matches a parent who has successfully reunited with their child with a parent currently involved in the child welfare system. The parent partners mentor and help parents utilize community resources. In addition to individual mentoring, Iowa intentionally developed its parent partner system to provide a parent voice in interagency partnerships and child welfare policymaking. Goals of the Parent Partner Approach include:

- Influence policy and practice in the state to reflect parents' perspectives;
- Change the agency culture to reflect parents' strengths;
- Reduce rates of reentry into foster care;
- Shorten lengths of stay; and
- Increase skills and opportunities for parents.

Program Snapshot: Focus on Substance Abuse

The Family Recovery Program (FRP) is an independent nonprofit organization with offices in Baltimore and Washington, DC. Parent mentors in the FRP are part of a holistic case management approach, including family treatment drug court, focused on sobriety for parents involved in the child welfare system. The parent partners, called Parent Mentors in this program, come with extensive knowledge of navigating the child welfare system either through personal or professional experiences and receive training in promoting recovery, removing barriers, connecting parents with services, and encouraging overall emotional and physical health. They are matched with parents whose children have been removed or are at risk of being removed by child welfare.

Parent mentors work closely with parents throughout the reunification and recovery process. In addition to guiding parents to services and supporting them through stressful court hearings, parent mentors coach parents on preparing for and utilizing parenting time/visitation, accompany them to children's education, health, and mental health appointments, and assist in developing child service plans. Through coaching based on lived experience, parent mentors thus model "healthy parenting while sober" behaviors with parents and children.

Promising Research

Parent partner programs have grown more numerous in recent years. Although they are founded and administered in a variety of settings, the programs have a common grounding in the model of peer support to improve outcomes. A conference presentation on parent partners was fittingly titled, "I've Been in Your Shoes; Now Let's Walk Together." Although there is room for more research to show how participation impacts outcomes, a

number of process evaluations and studies of individual parent partner programs have produced promising positive results.

One recent study compared a sample of parents whose children had been removed and who participated in the initial parent orientation session (the first step of mentorship engagement) with a sample of parents from the same region and time period whose children were also removed but did not participate in the program. The parents who participated in the orientation were 5.6

times as likely to ultimately be reunified with their children as those who did not.

Another study found that 60% of children with a parent mentor reunified with their parents within 12 months of removal compared to 26% of children whose parents were not served by the program. Counties adopting the Washington State Parents for Parents Program described above were found to have significantly higher reunification rates than comparable families in counties that did not have a program.

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