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The Critical Role of Parent Partner Programs: Policy and Practice Considerations



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A growing body of research shows that early identification of needs and services for young children and their parents involved in the child welfare system can improve child safety, increase well-being, facilitate permanent child placements, and strengthen families. However, for many parents who enter the child welfare system, there is understandably a deep mistrust of the system due to personal experiences of family separation and its lack of support to address parents' needs or recognize their strengths.

All parents, including those affected by trauma, benefit from strong social support and connections. Parents navigating the child welfare system, especially those with infants and toddlers, can benefit from opportunities to build mentoring relationships within their community, particularly with parents who have "lived experience."

Parent partner programs are critical to supporting parents involved in the child welfare system and therefore require commitment and intentional planning to ensure that they receive support both prior to engagement and on an ongoing basis. Parent partners model cross-system collaboration, improve services and systems for children and their families, and demonstrate engagement and personal initiative.



There are several important policies and practices that states and counties need to finance, implement, and sustain successful parent partner programs:


Early Engagement Between Parent Partners and Parents


Connection with a Wide Range of Resources and Service Providers


Intentionality in Onboarding and Ongoing Training


Funding for Compensation of a Livable Wage for Parent Partners


Community-Responsive Practice


Clinical Support and Reflective Space for Parent Partners


Support for and Engagement of Fathers


Partnership with Judicial Leadership and Attorneys


Partnership with Child Welfare


Continued Support for Parents After Case Closure

The recommendations in this brief serve as a starting point for states and sites to consider in the development and success of parent partner programs.

INTRODUCTION

Maintaining a secure relationship with a trusted caregiver is critical for the health and well-being of infants and toddlers. When very young children are placed in out-of-home care, including foster and kinship care, problems can be compounded if the placements are not supportive of the child's early development. In the absence of any critical safety concerns, most children who come to the attention of the child welfare system can and should continue to remain at home whenever possible, where they can receive services and supports needed to protect and support the whole family.[1] Removing children from their parents can inflict trauma on or increase the existing trauma of children, parents, and families. To address these factors, state and local governments can develop policies to prevent family separation, help families and children heal from trauma, and prevent reentry into the child welfare system. These policies should reflect and reinforce the critical importance of parents' relationships with their infants and toddlers, while also ensuring that children remain safe.

A growing body of research shows that early identification of needs and services for young children and their parents involved in the child welfare system can improve child safety, increase well-being, facilitate permanent child placements, and strengthen families.[2] However, many parents entering the child welfare system understandably have a deep mistrust of the system due to personal experiences of family separation and its lack of support to help address parents' needs or recognize their strengths. This can lead to feelings of alienation and mistrust, negatively impacting activities related to case plan completion. At the same time, navigating systems and identifying and accessing needed resources often seems insurmountable for families with young children engaged in the child welfare system.

All parents, including those affected by trauma, benefit from strong social support and connections. Parents navigating the child welfare system, especially those with infants and toddlers, can benefit from opportunities to build mentoring relationships within their community, particularly with parents who have lived experience.[a]

a Defined for this brief as parents who have been involved in the child welfare system.

The following policy brief focuses on the critical role of parent partner programs in supporting parents involved in the child welfare system. Actively engaging parents in decision making while bolstering a family's protective factors—through such actions as valuing parents, and supporting parents as decision-makers from a strengths-based perspective—can lead to improved outcomes for children and families. Moreover, parent partners can serve as a critical support to help parents connect with resources needed to keep their family together or reunify after they have been separated. This brief provides recommendations for states and communities to consider in the development and success of parent partner programs and discusses:

- the benefits of working in collaboration with parents as partners and leaders;
- the challenges and lessons learned from developing, financing, and implementing parent partner programs, based on firsthand experience of parent partners and leaders; and
- recommended policies and practices for effective parent partner programs.

This brief incorporates discussions with 10 parent partner programs across the country,[b] as well as guidance and input from parent leaders with the Infant-Toddler Court Program National Resource Center.

Parent partners (also known as parent mentors, parent support partners, and parent allies) are individuals who have lived experience navigating the child welfare system as a parent, understand how the child welfare system works, have no open cases, and demonstrate personal and family stability.[3] Parent partners deliver supports that can take shape through many activities:



Mentoring – Peers can provide support and encouragement.

Resource Navigation – Peers can often provide improved and more trusted help to parents to identify and access resources.

Support Groups – Peers can lead groups in providing reflection and connection to resources and to each other.

Training – Peers can provide training for individuals experiencing the system or for stakeholders providing services within the system.

1:1 Coaching on Navigating Systems and Processes – Peers can provide one-on-one coaching to individuals experiencing the system, specifically on how to successfully navigate bureaucracy, processes, procedures, and complex systems.

Individual Support – Peers can serve as advocates for individuals who are currently involved in the child welfare system.

Outreach – Peers may be able to connect individuals experiencing the system with resources, services, and opportunities to become peer leaders themselves.[4]

In the ZERO TO THREE Safe Babies approach, parent partners provide mentoring to parents navigating the child welfare system by attending family team meetings and meeting with parents individually to provide support and resources.[5] Parent partners with lived experience are an invaluable resource to parents experiencing the trauma of being involved with the child welfare system so early in their child's life.[6]

b Programs interviewed include: Mentor Parents Program, Dependency Advocacy Center, Santa Clara County, Calif.; Parents for Parents Program, NAMI of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, Fla.; Parent Partner and Makua Allies Programs, EPIC 'Ohana, Hawaii; Parent Partners Program, Iowa Department of Health and Human Services; Parent Mentor Program, Minnesota One-Stop for Communities, Hennepin, Ramsey, and St. Louis, Min.; Parent Partner Program, Tru Vista Foundation, Reno, Nev.; Parent to Parent Program, Circle of Care, Tulsa, Okla.; Parents for Parents Program, Children's Home Society of Washington, Seattle; Parents Supporting Parents Program, Wisconsin; Parents Supporting Parents Program, Milwaukee.

PARENT PARTNERS AND PARENT LEADERS ARE CRITICAL TO SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN CHILD WELFARE

The voices of parents need to be valued and integrated into planning and decision-making, as child welfare and other early childhood leaders consider ways to improve or restructure their systems. Parent leaders—who have lived experience navigating the reunification process within the child welfare system[7]—play a crucial role in ensuring that the parent voice is heard in family-serving systems at the local, state, and federal levels. They can bridge the gap between families and other professionals in the decision-making process of practice change.[8] Parent leaders rely on their own experiences to inform policy and practice changes that can benefit families involved in the child welfare system. Many parent leaders currently serve or have previously served as partners to other parents navigating the system.[9]

Parent mentors can be valuable stakeholders in systems change efforts. Their close connection and relationship with parents gives them a distinct perspective on what is working and what is not working for families navigating investigations and court proceedings.

The Importance of the Parent Voice[c]:

"When parent voice is lifted, children succeed. It is our responsibility as a community to raise every child by listening to their most trusted protector. If we listen to parents more, we understand that every child has unique needs and we are able to identify resources and supports to help families be successful."

– Lindsay Calveri, Parent Leader, Infant-Toddler Court Program National Resource Center

c ZERO TO THREE. (2024, January 31). *How can including parent voice change the trajectory of a baby involved in child welfare?* https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/how-can-including-parent-voice-change-the-trajectory-of-child-welfare/

Though limited, research on parent partner programs in child welfare has yielded some promising findings, including higher rates of reunification for participating parents, lower rates of reentry for children involved in the program, and increased participation in services and court hearings.[10] An evaluation of Iowa's Parent Partner Approach found that participating parents were significantly more likely to have a child in out-of-home care return home and less likely to experience subsequent removal from the home after 12 months, with no significant difference in the length of stay in care for their children.[11] An evaluation of a parent partner program in Contra Costa County, Calif., found that parents working with partners had significantly higher rates of reunification than families without parental partner support.[12] A study of Washington State's Parents for Parents program found higher rates of reunification among participating parents, while earlier studies found increased rates of participation in court hearings and greater compliance court-ordered case plans among participating parents.[13]

Peer support programs have been extensively studied in mental health and substance use treatment. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) determined that peer support is a crucial complement to the traditional service array, citing evidence that peer support models recovery and offers hope; increases self-esteem, confidence, and sense of control; contributes to improved social support and social functioning; and is effective for supporting recovery.[14]

The Importance of the Parent Voice[d]:

"When a parent feels supported by their community, their neighborhood, their school district, when they have access to what they need, they can be the best version of themselves. An empowered parent invests in their child's future, a supported parent can be present for their child, and a healing parent can heal their child."

– Kimberly Nabarro, Parent Leader, Infant-Toddler Court Program National Resource Center



d ZERO TO THREE. (2024, January 31). *How can including parent voice change the trajectory of a baby involved in child welfare?* https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/how-can-including-parent-voice-change-the-trajectory-of-child-welfare/

A Day in the Life of a Parent Partner (Makua Ally)

Kimberly Nabarro, Makua Allies and Parent Partner Programs, EPIC ʻOhana, Hawaii

"In a typical day, I will be driving all over the island. I will start off my day at court with one of the moms I partner with, at a hearing for petition for foster custody. It is crucial and important that I attend alongside the mom to share the importance of connecting with her attorney, empowering her to ask questions—including questions she has about where her child is placed—and sharing information that would be important for the caregiver to have. I help her to know that all her efforts matter. We work on articulating what she has been working on, making sure the attorney is prepared with all the vital information prior to that first court hearing. I am there as moral support for mom and dad; I support them before and after court preparation. If mom had trouble hearing all that was said—which happens when you are flooded with emotion—I can help her recall what was said and what our next steps are.

From there, I may accompany another mom to a prenatal appointment at the specialty clinic. I am there for her; I go into the appointment with her for the ultrasound so she isn't alone. I may point out some of the books that are in the waiting room about pregnancy, utilizing time to talk about our next meeting and where we are with her goals with regard to things like housing and treatment. I provide gentle reminders so she can take the lead on what we will do in our time together.

Then I will likely be following up with another case of mine that may be at the tail end—the mom wants to meet with me about her time at her job. She talks to me about a child care barrier she is facing—that she wants to change her child care provider but she doesn't want it to impact her ability to get to work—and she wants my guidance and support on that.

Once a month, I meet with Hawaii's Early Childhood Action Strategy Maternal and Infant Health Collaborative—a workgroup including professionals from Medicaid, treatment centers, peer leaders—around perinatal substance use disorder. I provide an update on Makua Allies, including cases and new referrals. I love to share beginning to end what is going on with a case, highlighting the collaborative effort so that the professionals can see that it works—that the work we are doing here is really being applied. This helps keep momentum. Being a part of spaces like this is so important, where different parts of the system are meeting and committing to shed light on barriers and, importantly, make those changes in real time.

I end my day checking in with the therapist that supports our Parent Partner Program. Being able to check in with the therapist about how I felt, using this space to reflect on my own experience, my feelings of being in family court, and what I did to support mom, I am able to share what was challenging for me that day."



STATES AND SITES HAVE OVERCOME CHALLENGES AROUND FUNDING AND CAPACITY TO SUCCESSFULLY OPERATE PARENT PARTNER PROGRAMS

While parent partner programs have been shown to have positive impacts, only a handful of states currently provide partners for parents navigating the child welfare and court systems. Such services are among the least likely to be routinely offered to parents among all supports surveyed, according to a Child Trends and ZERO TO THREE state survey of child welfare systems.[15] Even in states where parent partner programs do exist, such programs are often limited to specific geographic areas and not available to all families entering the child welfare system. Challenges to expanding parent partner programs include identifying funding, increasing support for and buy-in of parent partners as critical members of the workforce, and overcoming barriers to hiring and sustaining a parent partner workforce.



> *"Parent partner programs are self-sustaining in their workforce. We have recently hired a new parent partner. She was one of the first parents we worked with when the program started. After her case closed, she stayed connected with us through our support groups and our parent advisory council. When the position opened for a parent partner, she was our top applicant, as she had been a participant and had the passion we were looking for. We are finding that parent participants can be developed into parent leaders, and eventually become parent partners."*
>
> – Sonya Johnson, Parents for Parents Program Coordinator, NAMI of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, Fla.

Identifying funding. Securing funding can be a challenge when starting up or sustaining a parent partner program. Because there is no dedicated federal funding source for such programs, they must rely on an array of sources. Of the programs identified in this brief, most received state funding and/or private foundation funding. Several federal sources were also used, including Title IV-B of the Social Security Act—both Court Improvement Program funds and funds through Subpart 1 of the Child Welfare Services Program—as well as Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act funding.

Some states have supported the expansion of parent partner programs through legislation that includes sustainable funding. In 2015, Washington State passed legislation to expand the implementation of its Parents for Parents program, which connects parent allies with parents who are entering the child welfare system. The legislation authorized funding to expand the program to additional counties, as well as funding for evaluation. Currently, the program is operating in all counties throughout the state.

While there is no dedicated federal funding stream for Parent Partner Programs, one potential opportunity exists in leveraging federal funding through the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). HHS recognized the importance of parent partner programs by including the Iowa Parent Partners Approach[16] [e] as an example of a promising program within the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse. Allowing eligible states to access FFPSA funding for the first time signifies an enhanced focus on prevention and support of parents through systems collaboration. However, more investment is needed at the federal level to expand and fund these programs, including technical assistance for program improvement and sustainability. Of note, per the FFPSA, parent partner services can only be accessed by families at risk of child welfare involvement and cannot be used once a child has been removed from the home. It is also worth noting that among the interviews we conducted, no program mentioned being able to access FFPSA funding—providing some indication of the current challenges faced by parent partner programs.

Another possible funding source is state Medicaid reimbursement through the peer support benefit. Peer support is a billable service in many states and may be available through the adult's or child's Medicaid coverage depending on the individual state's benefit design.[17] Frequently, these services are embedded in state behavioral health systems (mental health and substance use) for adults and children. Family access typically requires a clinical diagnosis and service eligibility determinations based on medical necessity.[18] Medicaid-billable peer support typically requires a certified peer support specialist, and certification programs are state-led with a range of criteria.[19] SAMHSA issued a set of core competencies for peer support workers.[20]

Increasing support for and buy-in of parent partners as critical members of the workforce. A second challenge to building a parent partner program involves the need to build support and buy-in in some states or communities for recognizing parent partners as valuable members of the early childhood or child welfare workforce.[f] There is still a lack of understanding that a parent with lived expertise—which other child welfare workers may not have—can meaningfully improve the outcomes of children and their parents. However, research shows that many birth parents find it difficult to trust and relate to their caseworkers, citing a distinct "social distance" that can make interactions feel adversarial and compromise a parent's level of engagement in services and the subsequent likelihood of successful reunification with their children.[21] Parent partners can help bridge this gap with parents and provide additional support to complement the important work of the child welfare caseworker.



e. The Iowa Parent Partners Program received a promising rating from the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse within the program category of in-home, skill-based programs.

f The challenge of parent partners gaining acceptance among other child welfare professionals, and being paid for those efforts, was raised in several interviews we conducted with parent partner organizations.

Overcoming barriers to hiring and sustaining a parent partner workforce. A third challenge identified by multiple parent partner programs across the country revolves around hiring and sustaining parent partners. Rules and regulations governing some federal grants and state funding sources may require background checks that could exclude some parent mentors based on prior substance use or criminal records. While background checks may be needed in certain cases to protect vulnerable populations from harm, such protections may also act as barriers to peers who offer a unique and valuable lived experience. Due to such challenges, many parent partners and parent leaders are hired as contractors, which tends to be associated with lower wages and a lack of benefits. As a result, parent partners frequently must take on additional jobs to maintain financial stability while balancing the demands of supporting the parents they work with, which can lead to additional stress. Other challenges include finding parent partners who reflect the community they serve.



Parent Leader Perspective on Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing a Parent Partner Program: At a ZERO TO THREE convening of more than 25 parent leaders in December 2023, participants were surveyed on the key considerations for communities and states to think about *before* bringing parents with lived experience into a parent partner program. The following are responses from parent leaders:

- Establish parents in leadership roles within the parent partner program. (If lived experience is valued, it should be reflected in program leadership.)
- Put a plan in place up front for fair compensation of parent partners.
- Training for potential parent partners should be available both before and during the parent partner's time with the program.
- Potential parent partners should be actively in recovery from any substance use (for at least one year).
- Potential parent partners' values should align with the state's mission.
- The program should conduct integration and team building of all members before jumping into the work.
- Identify partners within the judicial system to align with the program before starting the work.
- It is important to figure out funding to establish a sustainable program.
- Therapeutic support should be in place for parent partners.

The Importance of the Parent Voice[g]: *"Parent voice gives children a voice. Everyone comes from a different way of life, and parents sitting at the table can share these different experiences."*
– Crystal Hallock, Parent Leader, Infant-Toddler Court Program National Resource Center

g. ZERO TO THREE. (2024, January 31). *How can including parent voice change the trajectory of a baby involved in child welfare?* https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/how-can-including-parent-voice-change-the-trajectory-of-child-welfare/

POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS FOR FINANCING AND SUSTAINING A PARENT PARTNER PROGRAM

Parent partner programs vary by the program model used, resources provided, and practices for partnering with parents. However, there are many common elements across parent partner programs. All programs require commitment and intentional planning to ensure that parents serving in these important roles are receiving support both prior to engaging in the work and on an ongoing basis. Parent partners model cross-system collaboration, improve services and systems for children and their families, and demonstrate engagement and personal initiative.

There are many factors to consider when states develop a program and policy related to which parent partners are hired to support families in the child welfare system, including during the investigation process. In developing a new program, or adapting an existing model, consider available research and evidence on effectiveness, including how the program can effectively work with all families.

The section below describes important policies and practices that states and counties have indicated are needed to finance, implement, and sustain a parent partner program, including:

- Early Engagement Between Parent Partners and Parents
- Connection with a Wide Range of Resources and Service Providers
- Intentionality in Onboarding and Ongoing Training
- Funding for Compensation of a Livable Wage for Parent Partners
- Community-Responsive Practice
- Clinical Support and Reflective Space for Parent Partners
- Support for and Engagement of Fathers
- Partnership with Judicial Leadership and Attorneys
- Partnership with Child Welfare
- Continued Support for Parents After Case Closure

Early Engagement Between Parent Partners and Parents

The emphasis on support for parents and incorporating parents as partners in planning should be woven throughout every stage of parent partner program development. Many of these programs connect parent partners with parents on the day a case begins. When possible, connecting parents with a partner early on—such as during a pre-removal conference—can help a parent feel valued, empowered, and actively engaged from the start.

The Dependency Advocacy Center's Mentor Parent Program in Santa Clara County, California, connects with parents from day one. With an understanding that a big part of the parents' identity has been taken and the underlying uncertainty of what is going to happen next, the goal is to have a mentor connected to the parents on the first day of their case, and have the mentor stay with the parents throughout the case until their last day of court. The Iowa Department of Health and Human Services' Parent Partners Program has a practice of matching parent partners with parents within 48 hours of an open case. In the Parent for Parents (P4P) Program of NAMI of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, Florida, the parent partners initiate contact at the initial removal hearing, or shelter hearing, during which the judge introduces the parent partner to the parents. In P4P, early engagement is one of the key focuses; parent leaders within this program have learned that, during the time between when a parent has their child removed and when they receive a case plan, parents often lose hope. They focus on as many touchpoints as possible with parents to help them feel they are doing something to stay motivated.

In Hawaii, the Makua Allies Program of EPIC 'Ohana is able to work even further upstream, providing peer supports to pregnant and postpartum women before they have involvement with child welfare. The Makua Allies Program helps pregnant women who are battling substance use disorder get connected to supports and stable in their recovery so that they can keep their babies with them at birth. The program's focus is on keeping moms connected to their babies so they can believe in themselves as mothers, identify as "mom," and be able to feel connected in that role. Parents in the program are connected to an array of services and resources, including prenatal care, substance use treatment, housing, support in best practices for parenting and understanding infant mental health and child development, healthy pregnancy services, and home visiting. These supports help moms better understand and articulate what their babies need, including key milestones related to child development, giving them confidence in interacting with their children every step of the way. The program's peer support serves to build rapport and trust based on shared experience so that the mother can then be confident and trusting when connecting with others, including doctors, pediatricians, and other service providers.



Connection with a Wide Range of Resources and Service Providers

Parent partners provide a wide range of supports to families, playing a pivotal role in supporting parents' needs. They aim to provide a roadmap for parents, serving as a trusted resource with lived experience. They serve as ongoing contacts and support for parents, often identifying needed services such as food pantries, employment pathways, and housing. They provide important and ongoing guidance through the process of navigating the child welfare system and translate often-complicated terms and language to help parents better understand the process. Many parent partners serve as intermediaries between foster/resource parents and birth parents.

In the Parent Partner Program of EPIC 'Ohana in Hawaii, parent partners helps parents become strong advocates for their children and identifies ways to minimize barriers and make resources work for parents' needs. If a particular resource does not align with what a parent needs—such as a parenting class—the program can help identify another resource that better aligns with the parent's experience. The Parents for Parents Program of NAMI of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, Florida has identified three components of the parent partner's role: ongoing peer support; connection to community resources; and educating parents about the child welfare system. The Parent Partners Program of Tru Vista Foundation

in Washoe County, Nevada supports parents by answering questions about court and child welfare processes and terminology, attending court hearings with parents, and helping parents understand what to expect during family time or parent visits with the child. Tru Vista's parent partners are available any time of day to talk with parents and help them navigate crises, address worries and concerns, or offer a supportive perspective. In the Milwaukee, Wisconsin Parents Supporting Parents Program, parent partners go through court processes with parents, connect them with basic resources such as diapers and formula, help get them to appointments, and act as intermediaries between caregivers and parents.



Intentionality in Onboarding and Ongoing Training

During both the onboarding and training process, flexibility guided by ongoing parent partner-led input is critical. Parent partners can work full time or part time in their parent support role. While such flexibility is important, programs should also establish guidelines for minimum and maximum participation, including the number of parents that parent partners can mentor and support at a given time. Training for parent partners, as well as for child welfare agency and court staff, prepares them to offer effective support for parents and is critical to developing a relationship with those parents being mentored. Such training often includes sessions on intimate partner violence, mental health, family team meetings, community-responsive practice, and substance use. Ideally, parent partners can take advantage of existing trainings provided in their community that are related to early childhood development and mental health. For example, some parent partners have undergone training on infant and early childhood mental health to become endorsed in this area, which can often be identified through a state's infant mental health associations. Communities may also offer interdisciplinary training to a variety of early childhood professionals or paraprofessionals to build capacity, such as through Circle of Security, a program focused on improving caregiver-child relationships and enhancing secure attachment. Head Start and Early Head Start programs may also be able to provide training to build the skills and leadership abilities of parent leaders.

Training should also support parent partners in serving as role models for parents in the child welfare system, including in the development of the skills needed to help them become leaders in their communities. Parent partners may also play a dual role as parent leaders, providing training to court staff and other professionals on the perspective of parents and how to best support them. This can be important in bridging the gap between families and other professionals in the decision-making process of practice change. For example, in Michigan, Parent Leadership in State Government provides introductory leadership training and support to parents in using their voice to impact local, state, and federal program planning and policy development. Parents are also given the knowledge and skills to participate on advisory boards, committees, and other decision-making bodies. In New York City, Rise provides a range of training opportunities to help parents with lived experience become leaders in their communities to provide information and other supports to parents currently involved in the child welfare system. Parent leaders can also participate in peer support certification programs in their state, such as peer recovery support specialist training.

The Infant-Toddler Court Program National Resource Center has developed several resources to support parent leaders in becoming effective leaders in their communities, including training for onboarding parent leaders working at the community or state level. The four sessions comprising the training focus on defining the role of parent leader; understanding cross-disciplinary relationships for systems change; systems exploration and prevention efforts; and lifting your voice and taking care of yourself. The Infant Toddler Court Program also facilitates a monthly community of practice that provides parent leaders with an opportunity to network and learn from one another regarding leadership skills, and working as a lived expert within both the child welfare sector and the broader early childhood system.

The Circle of Care's Parent to Parent Program in Oklahoma has a set, consistent training and onboarding process for parent mentors before they begin working with parents, including a clear job description and a mapping out of what it looks like in the day-to day job of being a parent mentor. The Iowa Department of Health and Human Services' Parent Partners Program provides cross-training for parent partners, service providers, and department staff. The program's parent partners must complete six trainings before meeting with families, covering such topics as mandatory reporter responsibilities, boundaries, safety issues, a departmental overview, and confidentiality. The parent partners must also complete supplemental training within one year of starting with the program on issues such as domestic violence, mental health, community-responsive practice, and substance abuse.

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A core component of the Parents for Parents (P4P) Program, operated by the Children's Home Society, in Washington State is Dependency 101, a session designed to educate and empower parents with the tools, strategies, and support they need to be successful in the dependency process. During the session, parents watch an informational video about the child welfare system and the importance of engaging with services, as well as hear directly from professionals in their jurisdiction, including an assistant attorney general (lawyer for the department), a parent lawyer, a guardian ad litem or court-appointed special advocate, and a social worker. Some counties also have a judge attend the session. Each professional explains their role to the parents and how they can help them and their family throughout their case. Parents can also attend additional educational and support sessions around such topics as visitation, housing, or parent resources, as well as benefit from an informal support structure that allows them to get help from other parents and parent allies.



Funding for Compensation of a Livable Wage for Parent Partners

Funding for parent partners should be identified as early as possible in the program development process, with established payment mechanisms. This may include creating state or local government positions or contracting with community-based organizations to provide services. Parent partners should be compensated fairly, and organizations that hire or contract with them should consider whether any wages they receive could potentially have a negative impact by reducing their eligibility for various safety net programs. For example, parent partners should not be forced to choose between work and losing access to child care benefits.

The Parents for Parents Program of NAMI of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, Florida, has established a process for parent partners to undergo background checks and navigate the exemption process that is both intricate and time-intensive. NAMI emphasizes the importance of having such a process in place before hiring parent partners to ensure that qualified people are hired into these roles. The Circle of Care's Parent to Parent Program in Oklahoma initially faced challenges in its invoice process, as the program's parent partners are paid as subcontractors and not directly hired through Circle of Care. This resulted in a lag in mentors receiving initial training and payment. The program subsequently improved communication with its finance team, digitized documents, and streamlined its invoice forms and payment system to avoid any future delays in ensuring that parent partners get paid for their work.



Community-Responsive Practice

Parent partners should reflect the communities and program sites they serve and bring lived experience that supports meaningful engagement with families.[22] This should be informed by relevant data on children and parents involved in the child welfare system.

Several programs have prioritized recruitment strategies that strengthen communication and engagement with families. For example, the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services' Parent Partners Program and the Minnesota One-Stop for Communities' Parent Mentor Program in Hennepin, Ramsey, and St. Louis intentionally engage parent partners from the community who are proficient in multiple languages. They supplement staff capacity using interpreters to reduce communication barriers and improve access to services.

The Parent Partner Program of EPIC 'Ohana in Hawaii certifies all parent partners through a community-responsive training program for peer support specialists that emphasizes relationship-building and trauma-responsive approaches. Parent partners and Makua allies in Hawaii also have the opportunity to attend Ho`oa`a Deep Dive Sessions. ("Ho'oa'a" means to enable to develop roots.) These sessions are designed for people within the child welfare community, including those who work for child welfare services, service providers, and other agencies supporting Native Hawaiian families and children. The sessions allow participants to reflect on their personal journeys and/or family stories, and to discuss and reflect with others. The intent of these sessions is to improve outcomes for children and families by strengthening understanding, trust, and effectiveness in service delivery.

Clinical Support and Reflective Space for Parent Partners

Research shows that individuals who work with families involved in the child welfare system can experience secondary trauma, and this trauma can be exacerbated for those with lived experience. Consequently, it is important that parent partners have distance between their own involvement in child welfare and their supportive role of others, given the trauma that many parents who were involved in the child welfare system carry. Parent partner programs often have policies in place requiring that a potential parent partner's own involvement with the child welfare system has to have ended or been resolved for at least a year prior to starting work.

Programs should identify a designated staff support person who is committed to working with parent partners, who they can trust and speak with for ongoing support. Additional support may include consistent meetings with a licensed mental health therapist or someone in a similar position as an opportunity to seek and receive counseling when issues come up while doing this work. Support should be built into the culture of all parent partner programs.

In the **Circle of Care's Parent to Parent Program in Oklahoma,** a counselor facilitates a monthly support group for parent mentors, with about six to seven dedicated parent mentors per group. This offers an opportunity for parent partners to build close relationships and discuss any triggers associated with their case. For example, when a parent mentor is dealing with a relinquishment case similar to their own, they are able to receive assistance from the support group. The **Parents for Parents Program of NAMI of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, Fla.,** also offers parenting support groups. The program has a clinical supervisor who is a licensed mental health therapist, who meets bimonthly with parent partners to help process their work. The **Parent Partner Program of EPIC 'Ohana in Hawaii** provides both group supervision with peers for parent partners, as well as one-on-one support with supervisors focused on parent partners' mental health and feelings of safety. A newly added benefit for EPIC 'Ohana's program provides parent partners with intentional support from their supervisors, as well as the option to develop individualized wellness recovery action plans.



Support for and Engagement of Fathers

Another critical parent partner program practice/policy should focus on building the capacity of staff to effectively engage and partner with fathers. When families come to the attention of the child welfare system, program professionals should be prepared via training on effective father-specific engagement strategies and identification practices. Child-serving agencies should partner with fathers and fatherhood organizations on system improvement efforts throughout the process.

The **Iowa Department of Health and Human Services' Parent Partner Program** has been intentional about fatherhood engagement, particularly over the last three years. This begins with increasing awareness at the child welfare level of the importance of engaging dads and making sure they are heard and included, making them feel more engaged in their case. Iowa's program is strategic in its approach, holding team meetings in the evenings with the awareness that many dads are single fathers or the main source of income in their home and therefore cannot attend daytime meetings.

Partnership with Judicial Leadership and Attorneys

A growing body of research demonstrates the importance of creating judicial policies and practices that empower parents and reinforce the importance of maintaining the child–parent relationship. Before beginning a parent partner program, it is important to have judges, court staff, and attorneys who are visible and vocal champions to elevate the voice of parents (although some sites may need to build such support over time). Through their leadership, these individuals can push their colleagues forward towards a shared vision of improvement and model partnership with parents. Judges and other professionals working with parent partners can also help foster opportunities to build confidence and motivation, with an emphasis on recognizing and building on parents' strengths.

In Wisconsin, the Court Improvement Program and the Department of Children and Families worked with participants of the Parents Supporting Parents Program in the development of such educational resources as "An Introduction to Child Welfare: For Parents, by Parents" and "Understanding the Language of Child Welfare." The **Dependency Advocacy Center's Mentor Parents Program in Santa Clara County,** California, also emphasizes the importance of partnership and buy-in from the courts. The local judge is a big supporter of the Mentor Parents Program and a champion for parents considering working with a parent partner. At the **Minnesota One-Stop for Communities Parent Mentor Program,** the program director sits on the board of the Children's Justice Initiative—a collaboration between the Minnesota Judicial Branch and the Minnesota Department of Human Services—and works to promote the program to judges, court attorneys, and other key partners.

Partnership with Child Welfare

Another important component of parent partner programs is a strong working relationship with the local child welfare agency and a commitment to elevating the voices of parents with lived experience at all levels of the agency—from administration to frontline caseworkers. While many parent partner programs we spoke to had formed such partnerships with child welfare staff and leadership, some also recognized the value of parent partners serving as advocates for parents, playing a collaborative but distinct role from that of the child welfare agency.



The **Dependency Advocacy Center's Mentor Parents Program in Santa Clara County, California,** works closely with the state's Department of Family and Children's Services and its management team, who encourage their social workers to support the program. Additionally, the Mentor Parents Program manager provides training designed to help understand what parents are facing, including best practices for child-family team meetings. In **Washington State, the Parents for Parents (P4P) program** was designed from the beginning with a strategic partnership: a collaboration between birth parents and the child welfare agency and court staff. At **EPIC 'Ohana's Parent Partner Program in Hawaii,** parent partners worked with child welfare to reform the way family service plans are developed, including creating training videos of their experiences with family service plans, as well as strategies for effective partnering with families. Through EPIC 'Ohana's training of child welfare agency staff, caseworkers are initiating these changes in real time—and parent partners are seeing their contributions and suggestions being put into practice. **Wisconsin** currently has four local agencies implementing Parents Supporting Parents programs. Parent partners in the state work within their communities and local agencies—looking at current policy and practice within their agencies and educating workers in the child welfare system. Wisconsin parent partners sit on and support their local and state advisory councils and partner with community stakeholders—such as attorneys, schools, and domestic violence groups—to make changes within their communities. They also serve a role in supporting trainings and making presentations to child welfare professionals.



Continued Support for Parents After Case Closure

Parent partners can continue to be an important support to families following reunification and long after closure of a child welfare case. The need for supportive services does not decline when a child returns home, and providing post-permanency support for families can help prevent reentry of children into foster care. Parent partners can help parents navigate post-permanency services, such as community-based supports.

In Tru Vista Foundation's Parent Partner Program in Washoe County, Nevada Parent Partners work with some families for years, continuing to help them navigate crises and celebrate successes when they occur. This long-term role for parent partners is critical to preventing new involvement in child welfare and keeping families connected to ongoing supports and services. The Parents for Parents Program in Washington State builds a community around parents throughout their cases, so that after a case has ended, many parents continue to receive support and are often recruited to become parent partners themselves. In the local agencies implementing Wisconsin's Parents Supporting Parents Program, parent partners are available to work with parents after reunification for up to six months.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations in this brief serve as a starting point for states and sites to consider in the development and success of parent partner programs. Many of the challenges and key considerations are drawn from the parent partner programs included in this brief, as well as parent leaders with the Infant-Toddler Court Program National Resource Center, who graciously shared details about their programs and their firsthand experiences. Parent partners can serve as a critical support to help parents connect with resources needed to keep their families together or to reunify after they have been separated.

We recommend the following resources as continued support for sites and states exploring funding, implementing, and sustaining parent partner programs:

ZERO TO THREE Policy Framework
The National Infant-Toddler Court Program's "Strengthening Families with Infants and Toddlers: A Policy Framework" lays out a menu of options for state and local policymakers to develop policies that meet the basic components of what it takes for young children and families to thrive. By providing supports from the start, communities can enable families to nurture their children and promote positive outcomes for the entire family.

Parent Leaders Are Vital for Stronger Early Childhood Systems, ZERO TO THREE, Safe Babies

Promoting Peer Support in Child Welfare, Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Foster Club, Generations United, ZERO TO THREE

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APPENDIX: PARENT PARTNER PROGRAM SUMMARIES

Mentor Parents Program, Dependency Advocacy Center, Santa Clara County, Calif.

The Mentor Parents Program run by the Dependency Advocacy Center (DAC) exists to identify barriers to reunification, to provide role models for a clean and sober lifestyle, and to reach out to dependency court parents with a message of hope and recovery. Mentor parents work directly with DAC attorneys to encourage early engagement in rehabilitative services and provide guidance to parents as they navigate the child welfare system. The mentor parents have assisted hundreds of dependency court parents and play a significant role in Santa Clara County's specialized drug treatment court, the Dependency Wellness Court. Further, through their participation on systems-level committees and as guest speakers at a wide variety of trainings and conferences, DAC's mentor parents are able to bring parents' perspective into critical planning and implementation discussions that impact the larger dependency system.

Parents for Parents Program, NAMI of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, Fla.

Parents for Parents (P4P) is a new program within the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, funded by the Gulf Coast Community Foundation. P4P offers peer mentoring for families in the dependency court system, connecting parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system to parents who have recently become engaged with child protective services. The goal of P4P is to provide early outreach, education, and support to parents who have entered the dependency system so they can be reconnected to their children. P4P also provides parent partners with leadership and gateway employment opportunities as they provide support, knowledge, and mentoring to parents new to the system.

Parent Partner and Makua Allies Programs, Family WRAP Department, EPIC 'Ohana, Hawaii

Parent Partners is a program of EPIC 'Ohana that works to strengthen families and enhance the welfare of children and youth through transformative processes that are respectful, collaborative, and solution-oriented. Parent partners work as part of EPIC 'Ohana's Family WRAP Hawaii program team, which supports families involved with child welfare services. The parent partners provide support to families throughout the wellness recovery action plan (WRAP) process, with a focus on moving things forward and working together to make families' hopes and dreams become a reality. The Makua Allies program provides peer support to pregnant women or women who have given birth in the past 90 days that are suffering from substance use. The program helps prevent family separation and increase parents' sense of hope and self-efficacy by engaging them with community supports and services.

Parent Partners Program, Iowa Department of Health and Human Services

In Iowa, Parent Partners promotes an innovative change in social work practice that is unique because it not only celebrates individuals who have overcome obstacles through change, recovery, and accountability, but also uses their skills to mentor families who are currently navigating through the state's Department of Health and Human Services as their children are in foster or kinship care. Parent partners demonstrate advocacy and effective communication while holding families accountable in meeting their case plan goals. The parent partner is a key strategy to improving practice with families, but it cannot stand alone. Parent partners network within communities and collaborate with social workers and providers to meet the needs of families, assist in policy and program development, change perceptions in communities, and facilitate training and learning opportunities. As of 2020, Iowa's Parent Partners Program operates in all 99 counties in the state. The Iowa Parent Partner Approach is included in the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse.

Parent Mentor Program, Minnesota One-Stop for Communities

Operating in Hennepin, Ramsey, and St. Louis Counties, the Minnesota One-Stop for Communities Parent Mentor Program provides support for parents involved in the child protection system by helping them navigate their way through what can be an overwhelming and challenging process. A parent mentor will work with parents for the duration of their cases with child welfare and child protection—which can range from six

months to more than a year—and help them remain connected with services afterward. Because program mentors have firsthand experience, they can walk parents through every step to reunification or the best possible outcome for their family. Minnesota One-Stop for Communities has been helping parents navigate the challenges of the child welfare system since 2016.

Parent Partner Program, Tru Vista Foundation, Reno, Nev.

Working in partnership with Washoe County Specialty Courts and the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, Tru Vista helps reunite families by helping individuals recover, heal, and become the parents they need to be. Tru Vista provides mentorship, guidance, and financial support to help families on their journey. Parent partners have lived experience and success navigating their own sobriety and family reunification. Tru Vista also provides peer-to-peer support to parents in Safe Babies Court. Working closely with individuals, parent partners guide them on their recovery journey and advise them on how to work within the court and child welfare systems. Parent partners help parents set and achieve goals to successfully and safely reunite with their children, and they develop a supportive relationship that can make the difference in a client's successful completion of their mandated court program. Tru Vista parent partners are trained/certified peer recovery support supervisors.

Parent to Parent Program, Circle of Care, Tulsa, Okla.

Currently operating in 34 counties throughout Oklahoma, the Parent to Parent Program provides peer mentoring to parents whose children have been placed in foster care. Parent mentors are selected specifically for their lived experience navigating the child welfare system. Mentors offer support throughout the reunification process, including social support, guidance navigating the child welfare system, help accessing needed resources, and support toward reunification.

Parents for Parents Program, Children's Home Society of Washington

Currently operating in all 39 counties of Washington, Parents for Parents (P4P) connects parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system to parents who have recently become engaged with child protective services. P4P is an early engagement and education program run by parent allies, or parents who were previously involved in the child welfare system and have resolved the safety concerns that led to their own involvement in the system. When possible, the goal is to reunite parents and their children quickly and provide them with the tools they need to be successful. Parents are provided early outreach, education, and support to help them reconnect with their children. The program also provides parent allies with leadership and gateway employment opportunities as they provide support, knowledge, and mentoring to parents navigating the system. In 2015, Washington State passed legislation to expand implementation of its parent mentor program, based on P4P. The legislation authorized funding to expand the program in new sites, as well as evaluate program effectiveness.

Parents Supporting Parents Program, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, Madison

Wisconsin's Parents Supporting Parents (PSP) program is an evidence-based model aimed at empowering parents with lived child welfare experience as mentors to parents currently within the child welfare system. PSP follows Iowa's parent partner model. The program is a state-run effort that is implemented by local agencies, including the program in Milwaukee. The program started in three innovation zones and is currently implemented in four zones.

Parents who have experienced the child welfare system are engaged as leaders through:

- Direct service – by providing peer support to parents who are currently navigating the child welfare system
- Local systems change – through impacting and informing needed systems change by advising in their county and community
- State systems change – by contributing to and facilitating state policy change work by informing decisions.

PSP's parent mentors serve as models of hope and sources of support for parents currently experiencing public child welfare. Parents with lived experience help shape services and systems to promote child safety, permanency, and family well-being. Parent voices are elevated and supported as key partners in the child welfare process and toward system improvement, helping promote resilient and thriving families, communities, and systems.

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