



JURISDICTIONAL SCAN

# TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

## What are the key elements for **sustaining, expanding, and spreading parent partner programs?**

Across disciplines, peer support programs have emerged as an effective approach to support and empower individuals. One such model in child welfare, [parent partner programs](#), engage birth parents with lived experience as mentors to birth parents newly involved—or at risk of becoming involved—with the child protection agency. Parent partner programs focus on strengthening families' [protective factors](#) to prevent child abuse and neglect, and/or facilitate timely reunification.

A parent partner provides support, guidance, and hope as someone who has successfully navigated through a similar situation. Parent partners have a unique perspective and ability to empathize and connect with birth parents, and many birth parents attribute their successful reunification to the involvement of a parent partner. There is a [growing body of research](#) that demonstrates these programs lead to reunification and low rates of re-entry into foster care. In particular, program strategies of early engagement, peer-to-peer mentoring, reducing social isolation, and linking parents to services may contribute to these positive outcomes.

Interviews conducted with program staff from seven different parent partner programs<sup>1</sup> highlight the key elements for sustaining and expanding the programs, and spreading the model throughout the country. High-level themes derived from those interviews are summarized in the sections below.<sup>2</sup>



# What are the key elements for sustaining, expanding, and spreading parent partner programs?

## Priorities and values set by leadership

According to interview participants, it is critical for leadership to **articulate how the peer mentor approach aligns with the agency value of authentic family engagement**, supporting a paradigm shift from professional-to-parent to peer-to-peer. Leadership should communicate this value internally with staff and externally with community partners whenever possible. Staff at all levels need to clearly understand the evidence base and impact of parent partner programs as a powerful strategy for overcoming common challenges to family engagement, focusing on family strengths and needs, and forming trusting relationships with birth families.

All sites reported that **leadership support and champions** played a crucial role in the programs' success. Finding those champions (e.g., the Court Improvement Program and judges, guardians ad litem, community partners) was key, both when launching new programs and sustaining existing ones, especially during changing administrations or when program funding decisions are being made. Champions were able to communicate support for the paradigm shift to stakeholders in several areas, including:

- **Training and developing** state, local, and parent leaders.
- Establishing the importance of **tracking data, evaluation and outcomes**.
- Supporting an agency-wide **culture change** to value and embrace parent partners.

## Shift the culture to embrace parent expertise and voice

Implementing parent partner programs can **profoundly influence agency culture and climate**. The presence of parent partners working together with child welfare staff shifts the ways staff perceive and relate to families: as partners. Parent partners embody a powerful and compelling vision of what authentic partnership between families and child welfare can look like.

Interviewees illuminated how parent partners can help shift perceptions about parents involved with child welfare. All too often, the images and messages associated with parents who receive child welfare services are negative, deficit-focused, and focused on failure. Through thoughtful communication about parents' successes, parent partners are able to convey positive images that reshape perceptions. In many instances, **parent partners serve to humanize birth parents**, and offer tangible examples of the human capacity for meaningful and lasting change.

Interviewees also noted the importance of **addressing resistance** from both child welfare and other child-serving system professionals about the role of parent partners. Caseworkers and other professionals often expressed initial resistance at the idea of involving parents that were formerly involved in the system. Providing early opportunities to meet and engage with parent partners ensured that staff and stakeholders quickly saw the value of parent partners, approached them with questions, and included them in the process when working with families.

We had to do a major culture shift and establish trust, and evolve to a place where staff could see the value of partnering with birth parents who had been through the system.

— NINA POWELL,  
DIVISION CHIEF, LOS ANGELES COUNTY PARENTS IN PARTNERSHIP

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Reframing the narrative to emphasize that using parent partners helps keep families together has been key to gaining and sustaining staff support, especially in times of leadership and champion turnover. A secondary role of the parent partner has been to **institutionalize the parent voice in child welfare policy and practice** development. Interviewees noted that parent perspectives have been critical to tailoring policies and practices—or creating new ones—that meet family needs. In some sites, the parent partners have been involved in decision-making and participate in work group teams throughout the child welfare system, court systems, and community.

## Formalize supports for parent partners

Providing formal supports to parent partners is key to their being effective and satisfied in their role. For parents, the journey from being a service recipient to developing the skills and competencies necessary to serve as a professional parent partner can be complicated and requires appropriate supports.

**Building agency capacity to support parent partners** has focused on a variety of issues, including addressing staff reluctance, promoting families as partners, and establishing an infrastructure that supports ongoing professional development.

In addition to ongoing training, many of the programs incorporated ways to **support parent partners' health and wellness**, in order to provide them with a safe space to decompress from the pressures of the role and prevent burnout or transference. An unintended benefit or a secondary outcome, which has been largely unmeasured, is that of **continued advancement** through involvement in parent partner programs. Being

a parent mentor is often a gateway to parents' future professional trajectory, such that their roles as parent partners have launched their careers in child welfare or social services, as well as led them to pursue higher education degrees.

## Design a culturally responsive program

To be effective initially and over time, parent partner programs from the start need to **integrate cultural considerations into recruitment, hiring, and training plans**. The diversity of parent partners should reflect the diversity of the population served by the agency. According to the interviewees, parent partners need to be trained in a culturally responsive manner, and also need training themselves to help them be culturally sensitive to the families they support. When possible, parent partners should be matched with other families based on language needs and cultural background.

## Establish an evidence base and communicate outcomes

### Challenges in tracking outcomes

Interviewees from every site spoke of the need and desire to build an evidence base, but **the capacity for data gathering and evaluation varied widely**. The issues most frequently cited as affecting evaluation capacity were:

- Funding.
- Availability of reliable data.
- Maintaining fidelity.

What the parents enjoyed the most is ... getting together and being able to discuss the challenges of parenting without being judged.

— CHRISTIE FERRIS,  
BOARD MEMBER, CIRCLE OF PARENTS

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- Funding for site/program replication.
- The ethics of conducting randomized controlled trials on the child welfare population.
- The difficulty of measuring outcomes and building a research base for primary prevention programs (e.g., Parent Cafés, Circle of Parents).

According to the interviewees, the nature of the population served results in an increased level of difficulty in building the research base. Participation in many of the prevention programs is voluntary and anonymous, making it more difficult to collect and track data on improvement at an individual or family level. Much of the data collected are from self-reports of change in knowledge or satisfaction, with no clear link to impact on child safety, permanency, and well-being. The inability to track outcomes using administrative data from the child protection agency adds a level of difficulty to building a more robust evidence base.

## Leveraging relationships to communicate success

A few of the sites used positive outcomes on prevention and reunification from their evaluations to make the case for program expansion or an increase in program funding. In these instances, support from an existing advocacy group that had **established relationships**

## with agency leadership and/or the state Legislature

was essential as it provided access to message the positive outcomes. One site was able to advocate successfully with state legislators to pass a law establishing a statewide parent partner program. Conversely, for the sites without these existing relationships with other advocates or legislators, it was more difficult to communicate and leverage positive evaluation findings to support program sustainability or expansion.

## The road ahead

### Funding sustainability

Funding was a key issue in almost all of the sites. Programs across the country have struggled with sustaining parent partner programs once the initial seed funding is exhausted. When funding dries up, programs risk losing advancements in practices, service provision, and positive outcomes for children and families. In addition, family leaders and program champions become discouraged and seem to be less likely to support other innovative programs and change initiatives focused on parent voice and choice.

For many sites, funding has been largely dependent on short-term grants, which are time intensive and



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require dedicated staff to manage. Even when the core service provisions are sustained, there is often a **lack of funding for data tracking, program expansion, advocacy, research, and/or long-term evaluation activities**. These funding constraints have an impact on program growth and on the potential to build a body of knowledge about the effects of these programs on children and families, which is particularly problematic as interest and requirements for research- and evidence-based practices continue to expand.

## Leveraging community partners

All of the sites recognized the importance of **obtaining support from community partners**, lauding their role as invaluable allies in the design and ongoing operation of a parent partner program. Some of the sites noted excellent relationships with their state agencies and legislatures, which improved their chances of program sustainability and potential expansion. Other sites have developed good relationships with university partners, which have resulted in strong evaluations, often conducted at no cost to the parent partner program itself.

## Creating support to scale and spread

There was high interest from sites for peer learning on how to scale, further evaluate, increase buy-in, and improve sustainability. Interviewees were interested in **creating a network of parent partner programs** from across the country to learn from one another and share strategies, challenges, and lessons learned.

## Funding options

There are a number of opportunities to consider to support the growth and expansion of parent partner programs. The [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) provides new opportunities for states and tribes operating Title IV-E programs to use open-ended federal funding to provide prevention services to families at risk of entry into foster care. Regardless of new federal dollars, however, potential state and local funds also should be explored, as relatively low program costs and likely positive outcomes make parent partner programs a worthwhile investment. By increasing reunifications, decreasing entries into care, and improving parent engagement, parent partner programs can both improve child and family outcomes while also leading to overall cost savings.

- 1 Iowa's Parent Partner program, Jefferson County, Kentucky's Parenting Advocacy Program, Los Angeles County Parents in Partnership, Kentucky Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams (START), Circle of Parents, Parent Cafés, and Washington's Parents for Parents.
- 2 The brief is based on the following interviews: Iowa Parent Partner Program staff, Iowa Department of Human Services, August 15, 2019; Nina Powell, Division Chief, Resource Family Recruitment and Parents in Partnership, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Dominique Robinson, Program Manager Parents in Partnership, DCFS, Tiffany Collins, Children's Services Administrator III, DCFS, September 3, 2019; Desirea Rhodes and Amanda Gehring, Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Kentucky Department of Community Based Services, September 4, 2019; Michelle Amann, Assistant Director, and Erin Smead, Director, START, Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Kentucky Department of Community Based Services, and Tina Willauer, Program Director, Children and Family Futures, Lake Forest, CA, September 10, 2019; Christie Ferris, Board Member of Circle of Parents, and Julie Rivnak-McAdam, Administrative Coordinator of Circle of Parents, September 16, 2019; Alise Morrissey, Director of Family Impact, Parents for Parents, Children's Home Society of Washington, September 24, 2019; Alexandra James, Senior Consultant, Katthe Wolf, President and CEO, Alexis Moreno, Outcomes and Impact Team Lead, National Parent Cafés, September 24, 2019.

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