



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

# STRONG FAMILIES

## How are parents impacted by **the child welfare system leading the way in parent advocacy?**

**Q&A with [Rise](#) leaders: Teresa Marrero, Peer Support Program Coordinator; Zoraida Ramirez, Peer Trainer; and Elliot Williams, Board Member<sup>1</sup>**

As a result of their lived experience, parents who have been impacted by the child welfare system know best what needs to change to better support families. They also know how to help other parents navigate child welfare, a system that often is complex and bureaucratic. **Rise**, a parent-led organization based in New York City, has a long history of advocating for parents impacted by child welfare, through peer and community support at both the individual and systems level. Rise has worked with its local child protection agency, the New York City Administration of Children's Services (ACS), over the last few years to make substantive changes within the system. Rise's work focuses primarily on advocacy, influencing policymakers, and creating communities where parents can receive care, healing, and support.



### **What is Rise?**

**Marrero:** Rise started as [a magazine](#) made for parents, by parents, and it has evolved in many ways. Rise is run by parents who have been impacted by child welfare, many of whom are people of color, and who live and work in the

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communities most impacted by the child welfare system, which we call the “family policing system.” Our first goal is to prevent unnecessary involvement with the child welfare system, and the second is to reform the system’s policies and practices. We want to ensure that families coming into contact with child welfare are less likely to have their children removed and, if children are removed, that they be returned more quickly. Rise supports parents and puts them in leadership roles within the organization. We aim to dismantle the current family policing system by creating communities where parents can be invested and involved. Ultimately, we offer collective healing and care to the families we work with.

## Why is it so important to partner with parents?

**Williams:** It’s very important for parents to be at the forefront of engagement so that they can make the decisions that are best for their families to move them forward. Change shouldn’t be a system movement but a *family movement*. When working with parents, it’s important to make sure their voices are heard, not quieted, and to help them understand their rights so they feel empowered and know what they can do in response to the allegations that are brought upon them, and what they can do to change the system.

**Ramirez:** As parents, we know what is best for our community and for our family. Because we are parents working with Rise, we ourselves have experienced a lot of hardships, and we often have similarities to other parents in the child welfare system. We can support them in a way that the local child welfare agency can’t.

## Can you describe what it looks like to meaningfully integrate parents into your work?

**Marrero:** At Rise, we listen to and validate everyone’s feelings and experiences, and we build from where

parents are when they first come to us. We invite them to be part of our community, which usually starts with our [Rise & Shine Parent Leadership Program](#). This is our entry point of training for parents to become leaders within their communities. When parents graduate from Rise & Shine, they join different projects as volunteers first, and then our goal is always to hire graduates to join our staff team when there are openings. Parents are involved in everything possible when it comes to decision-making and program development.

## How have you leveraged parent voice and experience to influence the child welfare system?

**Williams:** Since Rise has been working with ACS, I have personally seen the revolving door slow down. I used to see the same parent come in for an initial child safety conference every three to six months because they were continuously being scrutinized and reported. With the help of Rise, initial child safety conferences have moved from a concern-based conference to a strengths-based conference. I see a better approach to communicating with parents, and parents being seen as people, not as case numbers.

**Marrero:** I was one of the first parent advocates who started going to child safety conferences when I worked for another organization 17 years ago. We started by simply attending child safety conferences. ACS would say, “We have a child safety conference in this ZIP code, can you have a parent advocate here in 15 minutes?” And we would have someone there. Rise has also continued to fight for impacted parents to be part of each foster care agency across the city, using our [90-Day Parent Advocate Practice Model](#). ACS’s goal is to have 100 to 150 parent advocates

Parents are the ones impacted by the child welfare system, so if we are trying to affect change in that system, then who better to work with than the experts — the parents — who have first-hand experience?

— TERESA MARRERO,  
PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM COORDINATOR, RISE

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across all of its contracted agencies, and Rise is training all of these new parent advocates through our [Parent Advocate Training Program](#).

Having parent advocates working in foster care agencies will change the culture of the agencies themselves. The Parent Advocate Training Program is comprehensive and includes workshops focused on community-building, writing, and public speaking, as well as knowledge-building workshops covering a range of topics — for example, the history of child welfare, legal rights, trauma and self-care, restorative justice. One of our Rise parent advocate trainees went on to work at a foster care agency — the agency initially didn't want to hire her because she didn't have formal job experience but gave her a chance because of our training. Now she's the lead parent advocate. She pushed the agency to restart the [Parenting Journey](#) program at the agency, and she has been encouraging parents to take the Parenting Journey classes. Things like this create parent power within an agency.

**Williams:** Because of Rise's influence, I've also seen a change in the language that ACS workers use. For example, they understand the importance of calling a mother by her name, which feels more respectful to parents than referring to her as “bio mom.”

**Marrero:** We prefer the term “parent” instead of “birth parent,” and we are very clear with our stakeholders about why that is our preference. I've even heard the vice president of a foster care agency catch herself when saying “birth parent,” correcting herself in front of staff and acknowledging Rise's contribution to her understanding about [why that change in language is important](#). As a parent and a parent advocate, I

appreciate that we are able to impact others' thinking, including executives with decision-making authority.

## How do you address the disproportionality that persists within the child welfare system?

**Williams:** Rise's model of working with parents is designed to assist any family in crisis. But since families impacted by the system are disproportionately Black and brown families, that is who we mostly work with.

**Marrero:** We have learned by working in our communities that parents who have been impacted by child welfare are afraid of asking for support or reaching out for help due to the risk of child welfare getting involved in their lives again. We heard from families that they want a way to support each other outside the system, which is inherently racist, through peer networks, so we developed our [Peer and Community Care](#) model.

## What is the impact of your work?

**Marrero:** Parents involved in the child welfare system come to Rise and get the support and empowerment that they need from their peers, which helps them feel safe in asking for and providing support to each other. They also learn skills and tools to better advocate for themselves and other parents. Because of their experiences at Rise, we have seen parents start their own nonprofit organizations aimed at supporting other parents. We also see many of them get involved in community events in order to offer a parent perspective on various issues.

**Ramirez:** To be clear, parents have always advocated for themselves, even before working with Rise, but we

Ultimately, Rise is working to improve practices in the child welfare system that help prevent a child's removal and support faster reunification for all families. But we know that our work has a larger impact on families of color because they have been systematically treated differently from white families, which is why our work is focused on community-based peer support, outside the system.

— ELLIOT WILLIAMS,  
BOARD MEMBER, RISE

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give them the tools for how to do it in an effective way. Sometimes parents are mad and no one is listening to them because they sound angry, so we give them tools to express themselves without getting upset or saying something that might jeopardize them. Parents should be passionate about how they feel but we can teach them how to articulate it without being judged for being emotional.

## What are you most proud of?

**Ramirez:** Everything about using a peer model excites me and makes me very proud to be involved with Rise. For instance, our Peer Supporter Program partners with schools and community organizations to refer families that are struggling to parent-led support groups and peer-support specialists who connect parents directly to community resources. We're currently partnering with the Lower East Side Girls Club in Manhattan to train peer supporters in that community.

**Williams:** I'm proud that our organization is now being led by a person who was impacted by the child welfare system. I think that is a very powerful thing for other parents who are impacted to see. I'm proud of the fact that there are three Rise board members out of nine who are impacted parents, like me. Parents who start working with Rise can say, "There is a lot of potential here for me to be involved. I can see a road to growth and a way to help others on multiple levels — I can be an employee, volunteer, board member, donor, or whatever I set out to be in order to help others not go through the trauma I went through." That is amazing.

**Marrero:** Partnering with ACS to change the system is an accomplishment. Coming at ACS combatively won't get us the changes we want to see. That's what partnerships are all about: compromising and coming to the table to have hard discussions. The partnerships that we've created throughout the years have been important

— they've led us to where we are now in making real changes that impact families today and in the future.

## What are some of the challenges you've had to navigate?

**Marrero:** One challenge has been helping other organizations understand how Rise's work is focused on helping parents in any way we can. Having different programs that support parents in different ways is what Rise's work has always been about. At times, it has been a challenge for others to see how our mission, to dismantle the family policing system, can be done while working with that same system.

I think once people see the impact of our work, and they see our value, then they want to be involved. The tipping point was the dedicated and passionate people at Rise who believed in themselves and kept coming to the table with other organizations and pushing for what we believe in. I think that persistence and belief in the work that we do is what has gotten us to where we are now, and I'm proud of that.

**Ramirez:** Another challenge has been getting parents to see their own power. The trauma that parents have experienced often makes them guarded and wonder who they can trust. They wonder whether Rise is genuine. Building relationships takes time — people need to see consistency and care in order to open up and feel safe. After spending time with us, parents know that this is how we operate. Once they trust us, they can start to thrive as advocates and tap into the power they already had.

**Williams:** We operate with a "can-do" attitude at Rise. When we develop programs from scratch and have questions, we work to figure it out. We adapt when we need to adapt, we roll with the punches, and we get it done. If we were in the military, Rise's Parent Advocates

A big part of advocacy is not just telling somebody to do something but teaching them how to do things on their own — giving them the tools they need to make it work for their community.

— ZORAIDA RAMIREZ,  
PEER TRAINER, RISE

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would be like the Navy SEALs — no matter what the situation is, or how minimal their resources, they will analyze it, think about it, and accomplish their objectives.

## What is the first step in creating a parent advocacy program?

**Ramirez:** Learn from states that are ahead of your state when it comes to child welfare. New York leads the way in a lot of things when it comes to reforming systems, and there are many things we do really well — but there are other areas where we have a long way to go.

**Williams:** If your goal is truly to hear the voice of parents and have parents be the voice of change, then you will fund that change and you will put that money where your words are. If you're saying that your jurisdiction wants to hear parent voices, then move your funding over to a parent-led organization. It seems that anything that is about monitoring or policing a community is launched easily, but anything to empower or support a community becomes a big challenge.

## What advice do you have for child protection agencies that want to partner more effectively with parents?

**Williams:** At Rise, we like the concept of people being community *supporters*, not mandated reporters. Replace the language of "I'm saving children" with "I'm helping families." When you stop seeing your work as saving children from their parents and instead start seeing it as helping the parent through a situation, then the narrative changes. And the approach changes, as a caseworker will be more willing to support and assist a family instead of breaking a family apart.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT RISE

An overview of Rise's programs can be found at: [www.risemagazine.org/programs](http://www.risemagazine.org/programs). The website also contains [various publications and resources \(including downloadable handouts\)](#), and [tips for supporting parents in supervised visits](#). Connect with Rise via: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#).

**Ramirez:** Parents know what their families need and should be listened to, not judged for their situation or punished for it. Agencies should support families by giving parents options and choices, and by elevating their voices. And when including parent voice, be mindful that parents aren't being tokenized. It is important to make sure that the space feels safe for everyone to be heard. It is also important to understand how racism, class, and bias play a role in how parents are perceived and included.

**Marrero:** Be genuine when working with parents and have patience. Don't give up on a parent. It's important to have empathy. You can be empathetic toward someone even if you haven't been in the same situation. When you have empathy, you have compassion, which is very powerful in creating relationships and connecting with people. Systems often look at the parent as the problem, but they aren't the problem, the situation is the problem. Look at the parent as a partner and as part of the solution.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](http://Casey.org).

1 Adapted from an interview with Teresa Marrero, Rise Peer Supporter Program Coordinator; Zoraida Ramirez, Rise Peer Trainer; and Elliot Williams, Rise Board Member, on August 30, 2022.

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