



STRATEGY BRIEF

TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

How do parent partner programs **recruit, train, and supervise** parents with lived experience?

All parents need support, especially when navigating the complexities of the child welfare system. The lived experience of parent partners¹ — parents with a closed child welfare case who serve as mentors to parents currently involved with child welfare — enables them to engage parents in a way that other child welfare professionals cannot. A growing body of evidence and resounding testimony of parents suggest that the support parent partners provide, along with the hope they offer, can lead to [improved outcomes](#) for parents and their children.

[Parent partner programs](#) vary, including the support they offer, their relationship with the child welfare agency and court system, and [how they are structured](#) and funded. The parent partner role and related responsibilities, however, are essential common elements. Parent partners may provide guidance, accompany parents to court and meetings, and educate parents about the child welfare system. Identifying, preparing, and supporting individuals to serve as parent partners are critical to the success of any parent partner program, regardless of its scope, structure, or funding. This brief shares insights about the recruitment, hiring, training, and supervision of parent partners in several programs.² For additional information, see the related brief: [What are the key elements for sustaining, spreading, and expanding parent partner programs?](#)



casey family programs

How do parent partner programs recruit, train, and supervise parents with lived experience?

Recruitment and hiring

Parents who have a parent partner consistently point to the many ways that support has made a difference in their case. In turn, parent partners report appreciating the opportunity to “give back” by supporting and advocating for parents, and benefiting from the professional development that often accompanies the role. Being a parent partner, however, also can be challenging, as it requires individuals to both engage with a system where they may have experienced trauma, and support others who may currently be experiencing trauma because of that same system. It is essential that recruitment and hiring practices honor the importance of matching the right individual with this critical role.

Recruitment

Parent partners often are drawn to their position because of their desire to support parents and transform the system. Empathy, commitment, and passion are some of the most important traits to look for in potential candidates. Many programs begin the recruitment process while parents still are involved with the child welfare system. Caseworkers, court staff, judges, and current parent partners often identify potential parents who exemplify these traits, then program staff engage those individuals to gauge their interest in becoming a parent partner, after their case is closed.

The length of time that a family’s case must be closed before a parent can be considered for a parent partner role varies, ranging from immediately upon case closure to two years later. Some programs require parents to be reunified with their children, while others require that potential candidates have successfully navigated a child welfare case, regardless of whether the case

ended in reunification, adoption, or guardianship. The [Family Involvement Center](#) in Arizona points out that “successful” does not always mean reunification, since each parent has to decide what is best for their child and family, and a “child welfare case” does not always mean a dependency case.

Recruitment can be challenging, as many parents have no interest in interacting with the child welfare system after their case is closed. During the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, many programs reported that it was even more difficult to fill vacancies, for many of the same reasons as other social service agencies. In addition, potential candidates often had children at home during the pandemic, which made it especially challenging for them to consider a new job. Like many employers, some parent partner programs moved at least some of their operations to virtual environments to support recruitment of staff who needed to work remotely.

Creative strategies for recruitment are essential. [Parents for Parents](#) in Washington state recruits at related events, such as [reunification day celebrations](#) across the state. Programs also reach out to local substance use and mental health programs to recruit parents in recovery, since some program participants also may have experience with the child welfare system.

Understanding the community the program serves also is key to both recruitment and retention. [Morrison Child and Family Services](#) in Oregon analyzes the demographics of families served to help leadership identify whether the agency is able to meet the culturally specific needs of families, and then recruitment is tailored accordingly. For example, open positions might be posted in Spanish in addition to English if Spanish-speaking parent partners are

Had I not been given the opportunity to be a parent partner, I’m not exactly sure what my life would look like today.

— SARAH COLLIS,
PARENT PARTNER, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OF IOWA

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needed. The organization also formed an internal hiring committee of supervisors and parent partners to examine how bias impacts the hiring process, including the language used in job postings. These efforts appear to be making a difference: In 2020, parent partners reflected the racial and ethnic diversity of the families served.

Interviewing

Most programs do not require parent partners to have a degree or specific technical skills, provided they have the requisite lived experience. A candidate's motivation to be a parent partner also is key. A passion to help other parents is important, but candidates who are not interested in working alongside caseworkers, attorneys, and others to provide that support may not be the right fit for the position. Ideal candidates are parents who are self-reflective, honest about their past, and maintain a sober and crime-free lifestyle if addiction or criminal behavior was part of their history.

To assess these characteristics, program organizations may ask parents to share their experience with child welfare and other systems. Parent partners or supervisors with lived experience often are part of the interview panel so they can consider what kind of support a candidate might need, if hired. During the interview process for the Children's Home Society of Washington's **Parents for Parents program**, candidates must first respond to a series of questions in writing and then discuss those responses during the interview. The intent is to assess the candidate's written expression and problem-solving skills, and gauge the candidate's motivation and interest in the parent partner role, as well as the self-assessment of their own child welfare experience. [Kentucky's Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Team \(START\)](#) process begins with a pre-screen, followed by an intentionally lengthy two-part interview in which candidates can experience what it is like to share their journey, anticipate some of the challenges they might experience as a parent partner working as part of the child welfare system, and identify the support system they will turn to when they encounter those challenges.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND COMPENSATION

Some parent partners are employees of the program organization, while others are contractors or volunteers who receive a stipend. There are advantages to each model: employees have the stability and benefits that come with full-time employment, while a contractor/volunteer model provides parent partners with the flexibility to work as many hours as they would like. In [Riverside County's Children Services Division](#), being a county employee elevates the role of parent partners and equalizes them to caseworkers, while at [Children and Families of Iowa](#), contracting with parent partners opens the role to any qualified candidate since there are no staffing limitations. Regardless of the model, the key ingredient is that parent partners must be seen as valued and equal partners, which includes fair and equitable compensation.

Hiring

Most parent partners are required to pass a background check before they can start, though the type and the number of checks required varies by location and organization. Some offenses are automatic disqualifiers, such as sexual abuse or violent crimes, but parent partner programs do not require a clean record. It is vital that program leaders work closely with their human resource departments to help them understand that having criminal and/or child welfare history should not be a barrier to hiring candidates. For example, **Morrison Child and Family Services** recognizes that some of their best mentors may have a criminal history. Program supervisors help applicants navigate the background check process — for example, advising candidates to write a letter explaining the reasons behind their criminal history and emphasizing that it is no longer part of their lives.

Since the primary relationship is with parents instead of children, some parent partner organizations also have designed the role so that parent partners do not

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transport children or have unsupervised contact with children, which can make it easier to hire candidates with child welfare records.

Opportunities for development

Parent partner programs offer training and ongoing professional development, which varies by organization and the experiences and personal career goals of parent partners.

Standardized training

Parent partners who are employees of an organization typically receive the standardized training, orientation, and onboarding as other new employees. Many organizations, however, also require training specific to the parent partner role, which may include: how to share personal stories; setting boundaries; engaging families; teamwork and communication; documentation; and peer support. In **Riverside County, Calif.**, new parent partners attend the same core training as new caseworkers so that they can apply that knowledge to help families understand the caseworker role and the child welfare process. In Oklahoma, [NorthCare](#) requires parent partners to complete the Peer Recovery Support Specialist training, which is part of the state's peer mentor certification program, since it includes the essential core competencies that parent partners need to have. The **START** program in Kentucky has a similar requirement. Parent partners at **Children and Families of Iowa** must complete 11 trainings, with six required

before they begin their role,³ and the remaining five completed within the first year.⁴

In addition to adaptive skills, technical skills also are important. Most programs will hire parents with limited technical skills but will train them on everything they need to be successful, including how to use technology. Documenting effectively often is a new skill for parent partners, and training at [Stanford Sierra Youth & Families](#) in California includes learning how to collaboratively document in real time with the family as a means toward transparency.

Mentoring/shadowing

An essential component of the onboarding process for new parent partners is mentoring or on-the-job coaching. **Morrison Child and Family Services** requires new parent partners to shadow existing parent partners for 30 to 40 hours. During this time, new parent partners become more familiar with their new roles and responsibilities, and mentors get to know the parent partner's learning style so they can effectively coach them once they fully step into the role.

Parent partners have a wide variety of experiences and knowledge and, as a result, program organizations are generally flexible regarding their training needs. They try to encourage honest dialogue about how new parent partners are feeling about their role and any additional training or mentoring they may need. Programs also strive to ensure that both the parent partner and the supervisor feel comfortable with the parent partner starting to work independently with families. To ensure

Parent partner programs are transformative because they build generative capacity — if I help two people who help two people who help two people, we're building more and more and more of what we're really wanting to see, which is parents succeeding. I think this program and other peer programs give us that upward mobility and that chance to build a career and add value.

— AMBROSIA EBERHARDT,

STATEWIDE FAMILY IMPACT MANAGER, CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON (PARENTS FOR PARENTS PROGRAM)

mutual readiness, **Parents for Parents** developed a self-evaluation process in which the parent partners and the coordinators rate the parent partners on the same skills. Together, they discuss the ratings and share feedback. In areas identified for improvement, the coordinator and parent partner develop a plan together to help the parent partner gain the skills or knowledge needed.

Professional development

For some parent partners, this role may be their first professional position, and programs encourage them to pursue development opportunities and other relevant areas of interest as they think about their career path. Many organizations offer financial support for attending classes or trainings. In Kentucky, **START's** parent partners are employed through the University of Kentucky's College of Social Work. The university offers employees a benefit that waives the tuition costs for up to six hours of college coursework per semester. Additionally, the College of Social Work provides additional professional development opportunities to the parent partners. **Oregon** offers Certified Recovery Mentor credentialing classes, and **Morrison Child and Family Services** helps fund their parent partners to become credentialed so that they have a professional certification to add to their skills and resume. Every two years, parents are required to renew their credential, which necessitates 40 hours of continuing education and Morrison offers many in-house trainings to help parents meet that requirement. Similarly, parent partners at **NorthCare** must complete 12 hours of continuing education per year to maintain their certification.

Arizona's **Family Involvement Center** provides funding for parent partners to attend conferences and encourages them to pursue leadership opportunities. For example, one parent partner started a workgroup for incarcerated parents and another leads a group on parental reunification. In addition, the Family Involvement Center received a federal grant through the Opioid-Impacted Family Support Program to create a program specifically for parents who were dually involved in a dependency case and in recovery. Through the grant, parents obtain college credit and participate in an internship before entering into a registered

TELLING THEIR STORY

From recruitment to hiring to retention, one common element is the parent partner's story. Parent partners are in their professional role because of their lived experiences. As these experiences are very personal, parent partners may need to be supported in telling their story — or in not telling their story. Part of the onboarding process at **Stanford Sierra Youth & Families** includes training on what and how to share, and practice doing so in a safe environment. In **Riverside County's Children Services Division**, leadership has messaged to all staff that parent partners are more than their story, and there is no expectation that parent partners share their story unless they choose to do so. Supervisors play a key role in coaching parent partners regarding when to share their stories, and clinical and peer support are key to helping them process any feelings — positive or negative — that may arise.

apprenticeship program in peer support. **Riverside County** invites parent partners to take on leadership roles in the agency and the community. By learning and bringing new skills to the team, parent partners can share their expertise with others and build an organizational culture that values continuous learning and professional growth.

For parent partners interested in promotions, **Stanford Sierra Youth & Families** encourages them to attend leadership trainings and process how they would handle certain situations if they were in a leadership role. Continuously promoting growth opportunities has led to a consistent pool of internal applicants for vacant leadership positions and a department staffed entirely by individuals with lived experience. Similarly, the **Family Involvement Center, KY START, and Morrison Child and Family Services** have developed career ladders for parent partners who are interested in growing their skill sets and pursuing leadership career paths, such

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as providing support, coaching, and training to other parent partners — roles that may be stepping stones to becoming a supervisor.

Supervision and ongoing support

While parent partners must have lived experience as part of their role, not all organizations require the same of supervisors. Some interviewees felt that lived experience by supervisors and others in leadership roles is necessary, while others felt that supervisors can be equally effective if they have the right personality and skills, even if they have not experienced the child welfare system themselves.

Regardless of the experience of the supervisor, it is crucial that supervisors schedule frequent regular check-ins with parent partners. Karin Kline, director of child welfare initiatives at the **Family Involvement Center**, said: “Don’t take any shortcuts with coaching and supervision. Getting parent partners to be in the role requires a lot of support — and it is worth it.” Meeting consistently, along with an “open door” policy, is critical to ongoing success of a program so that parent partners can seek guidance on both a regular and an “as needed”

basis. Case review and status updates are regular agenda items for supervision, and supervisors also may address other topics such as secondary trauma, professional boundaries, and strategic sharing. Distinguishing between supervision and counseling, however, can be complicated at times.

Morrison Child and Family Services is in the process of writing a manual for supervisors that outlines a standard format, hoping to provide clarification about the supervisor role. The agency also has given structure to the supervision process by adapting the [Substance Use Disorder Peer Supervision Competencies](#), a validated tool used for performance reviews as well.

Clinical support

To help parent partners who may be in need of additional support beyond the scope of supervision, some programs also offer clinical support. Clinical support is designed to support the individual, while supervision is meant to focus on cases and the professional role of the parent partner. **NorthCare** has a therapist available to parent partners, while **Children and Families of Iowa** has a monthly meeting with a clinician for parent partners. At



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Stanford Sierra Youth & Families, parent partners meet every three weeks for a wellness group, which is an opportunity to process any vicarious trauma they may be experiencing and create individualized wellness/safety plans. The wellness group is required for all parent partners as a means to prioritize self-care.

Peer learning and support

In addition to supervision and clinical support, another strategy for ensuring that parent partners are

supported is the convening of regular team meetings. These peer support forums provide opportunities for parent partners to connect on critical topics and build relationships among themselves. Many programs offer weekly or monthly team meetings. Some invite leadership to participate while others provide space for parent partners to meet on their own. **Morrison Child and Family Services** is also piloting group supervision to provide parent partners with additional senior-level support and peer mentors with a leadership opportunity.

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

- 1 Parent partners also are known as parent mentors, peer partners, peer mentors, and other similar terms. The name of the role varies by organization. For this brief, the parents who provide these services are referred to as “parent partners.”
- 2 This brief is based on interviews with Karin Kline, director of child welfare initiatives, Family Involvement Center in Arizona, on Aug. 6, 2021; Roger DeLeon, parent partner, County of Riverside (Calif.) Children Services Division, on Aug. 10, 2021; Christina Cagle, director of family and youth partnership, Stanford Sierra Youth & Families in California, on July 15, 2021; Sara Persons, parent partner director, and Sarah Collis, parent partner, Children and Families of Iowa, on Aug. 25, 2021; Erin Smead, director, Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Team in Kentucky, on Sept. 29, 2021; Karen Coy, program manager, Oklahoma Parent Partners at NorthCare, on Aug. 25, 2021; Linda May Wacker, program director, Morrison Child and Family Services in Oregon, on Aug. 23, 2021; Jill Murphy, King County (Wash.) program supervisor, Parents for Parents, on Oct. 1, 2021; and Tarena Coleman, Spokane County/Lincoln County clinical supervisor; Ambrosia Eberhardt, statewide family impact manager, Children’s Home Society of Washington (Parents for Parents program); and Terreca DeFehr, program coordinator, Parents for Parents in Spokane and Lincoln counties (Wash.), on Sept. 9, 2021.
- 3 Trainings required by Children and Families of Iowa before starting as a peer partner: Building a Better Future, mandated reporter, boundaries and safety issues, DHS 101, family interaction, confidentiality.
- 4 Trainings required by Children and Families of Iowa during the first year after becoming a parent partner: Solution Focused meetings, domestic violence, mental health, cultural competency, substance abuse.

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