



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 inspire individuals. One such model in child welfare, [parent partner programs](#), engages 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 programs¹ 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.²



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 engagement and support. 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 input

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 and challenge adversarial thinking aimed towards parents. In many instances, **parent partners are able to help reframe the narrative about 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

As a parent partner I turn paper into people. Meaning when I am gathering a resource for a parent, I always like to make a warm contact. This has helped increase the comfort level of parents, because now it is not a cold call, but they have a person and information to connect with directly!"

— DAWNE' SHAW,
PEER AND WRAPAROUND SPECIALIST, CALIFORNIA

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

them with questions, and included them in the process when working with families.

Leadership can play a crucial role in building staff and organizational readiness that celebrates and supports the role of parent partners. Continued training and effective communication can help create more inclusive environments for understanding the unique roles of parent partners as key leaders in helping parents achieve their goals. Emphasizing that parent partners can help 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 **embed parent input 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. While parent partners generally impact families at the individual level, in some sites, the parent partners have also been involved in decision-making at the systems level, and participate in workgroups throughout the child welfare system, court systems, and community. Similarly, some child protection agencies have also developed parent advisory boards to formalize the process for including parent feedback in their decision-making processes. Leveraging the power of parents' perspectives at both the family and the systems level is a key strategy for shifting the way that child welfare views and engages families.

Formalize supports for parent partners

Providing formal supports to parent partners is key to their effectiveness and satisfaction 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 [initial training](#) and 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. Some programs have been intentional about creating space for peer support groups among parent partner leaders, especially during times of intense community challenges, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. 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

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

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

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 widely

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.
- 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,

Collecting data is a key component. It paints a picture for how effective a program is and how valuable peer mentors are in supporting families involved with the child welfare system.

— SARA PERSONS,
STATE DIRECTOR IOWA PARENT PARTNER, CHILDREN & FAMILIES OF IOWA

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

service provision, and positive outcomes for children and families. In addition, family leaders and program champions become discouraged and may 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 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.

Nonetheless, there are a number of [funding opportunities](#) to consider that could support the growth and expansion of parent partner programs. Medicaid, for example, is an optional benefit that states can choose to leverage in order to fund peer support such as parent partners. In addition, 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. Currently, 3 parent partner models ([Iowa's Parent Partner Approach](#), [Parents Anonymous](#), and the [Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams \(START\)](#)) have all been reviewed and rated by the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#). Regardless of federal dollars, however, potential state and local funds also should be explored, as relatively low program costs and positive outcomes make parent partner programs a worthwhile investment. By improving parent engagement, decreasing the number of children entering care, and increasing the number of families reunified, parent partner programs can both improve child and family outcomes and lead to overall cost savings.

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



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

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, which

led to the formation of the Parent Partner Learning Collaborative (PPLC) in 2020. The PPLC, which is led jointly by the [Children's Trust Fund Alliance](#), program directors of several parent partner programs, and Casey Family Programs, meets bi-monthly to network and strengthen existing programs, document learnings, elevate existing research evidence, and respond to technical assistance requests related to developing new parent partner programs.

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

- 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; and written correspondence with Dawne' Shaw, Peer and Wraparound Specialist, UC-Davis, August 25, 2023.

P 800.228.3559

P 206.282.7300

F 206.282.3555

[casey.org](#) | KMResources@casey.org

