



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

# HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

## How can fathers and other constituent leaders **inform Family First and other system change efforts?**

### **Q&A with Timothy Phipps, constituent consultant in Oregon<sup>1</sup>**

Timothy Phipps, a father who successfully navigated Oregon’s child welfare system, now serves as a constituent consultant, sharing his experience, to help improve that same system. Timothy offers his insight on the importance of including individuals with lived experience — including birth fathers — in system change efforts, and how to make their involvement meaningful.

### **What was your reason for getting involved in systems change?**

In February 2009, my child was removed and I entered inpatient treatment. We were only allowed to go to a few off-site meetings, and one of the meetings I went to was a Parents Anonymous group. The director of Morrison Child and Family Services was a facilitator for the group, and after I had been attending for a while, she offered me a job as a peer mentor.

Initially I had no idea about systems. I was in a position where I was clean for the first time in my life. I felt like me and my family finally had a future, and that I had an obligation to contribute in some way, to give back instead of taking. So I thought, “I’ll work with these dads, because I have the experience and I can help



them walk through this process.” Initially it was just to do one-on-one work with fathers, but as I began to do that work, I recognized that the only frame of reference I had was my own personal experience, that was the only thing I knew about the system and that was the only thing I was able to bring to the table. I learned that if I was going to try to help men navigate the system, I needed to really understand the system. So I created the father advisory board for that purpose.

## Why is it important to involve individuals with lived experience in system change efforts?

All kinds of companies and organizations have feedback loops from the end-user or consumer, and child welfare should be no exception. But there aren't typically a lot of feedback loops for consumers in a child welfare system — yet when conceiving, developing, and implementing policies and practices for families, you can't do that effectively without speaking to those same families, hearing from those families. Families know what they need, and families understand the dynamics of interacting with the system.

Having gone through the system, I am able to bring that lens to the table. Parents like myself are able to speak about what our system-involvement experience looks like, how these dynamics play out in real time, and some of the real challenges and benefits with regards to implementation of a particular policy or approach. When communities and individuals are able to be a part of these conversations, when they feel that there is a place for their experiences to be heard and to have an impact on decisions that are made, it builds trust. I became increasingly passionate and invested because, ultimately, I came to see that I was able to contribute in some real, tangible ways, and began to trust the system.

## How are you involved in your state's change efforts?

Our agency, Morrison Child and Family Services in Oregon, has existed since 1947 and its former director was a champion of the parent voice. She started our Parents Anonymous program, and after I became involved, one of the very first things I did was to set up the Fathers Advisory Board, which consists of a group of fathers who are former consumers of child welfare in our community, working together to identify the barriers that fathers most typically encounter in child welfare. Our focus for the last year has been treatment services. For instance, while there are about 381 substance use treatment beds in our district, approximately 76 are dedicated to mothers with children yet only three are sometimes available to fathers with children and none are dedicated to fathers with children. We've been trying to work with child welfare, county mental health and substance abuse treatment services to address this gap. We also focused on dedicated visitation spaces — there used to be no space for a father to visit with his child while in treatment, but we worked with our local treatment services, and now almost all have dedicated rooms for dads to visit with their kids.

We also have a parent advisory council funded by child welfare that includes 13 parents representing different areas of our state. We get together four times a year and spend half a day with the child welfare director, providing feedback on various issues and processes, or new initiatives - from development to implementation to evaluation. We also participate in all the PIPs [Program Improvement Plans] that result from the CFRS [Child and Family Services Reviews].

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— TIMOTHY PHIPPS  
CONSTITUENT CONSULTANT IN OREGON

## How did you become engaged with Oregon's Senate Committee on Human Services, Family First Implementation & Policy Work Group?

In conversation with staff from Casey Family Programs about Family First, I found out that Jamie Hinsz<sup>2</sup> was pulling together a committee. Casey staff and I reached out to Jamie and learned there was no birth parent representation on it — there were foster parents and youth alumni, but no parents. We advocated that parents should be at the table and engaged in implementation conversations, and the members were immediately open to that. It's still relatively early in our committee's process, but we are a part of it now and are meeting monthly.

## Should parents seek to engage in system change efforts right away once their case is closed, or wait for a period of time?

There is incredible value involving parents at both stages. My case is six years removed at this point, and my current context is based on the experiences of families that I am working with. Even though I can speak to my own experience, when discussing the impact of current policies on the ground, parents with recently closed cases are best able to represent that perspective — they have real-time truth about how it feels to be involved with the system. At the same time, parents need to be well-supported, as they may still carry resentment about their particular case. Lots of parents don't want anything to do with child welfare ever again — but I try to reframe things and say, "In my experience, child welfare was one of the

best things that ever happened to my family. And if that wasn't your experience, this is one way you can work to change things for other families in the future."

Being able to reconcile potentially negative feelings with the need to now interact with agency representatives in a pro-social, productive and collaborative way can be challenging for a lot of people who are feeling like the wounds of their case are still fresh. They may not have had sufficient time or opportunity to work through things that went on in their case. We recognize that feelings can be really raw, so we provide a lot of support and preparation both beforehand and afterwards. Most of the time we'll have a parent come and observe or participate initially in some small way, so that they can have a sense of what the process is until they feel comfortable and confident that they can do the work.

## What advice do you have for a child protection agency that wants to meaningfully engage with constituent consultants?

Sometimes it's just tokenism — agency staff are told that they need to have a parent at the table, but they don't understand how to make room for parents to actually participate in a meaningful way. The child welfare agency tends to have set processes, but for parents who aren't well-versed in the system, these processes can be challenging. They often need the agency to slow things down and make room for new voices to be heard.

1. Adapted from interview with Timothy Phipps, November 2, 2018
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