



BRIGHT SPOT BRIEF

# STRONG FAMILIES

## How does the Parents for Parents program help parents reunify with their children?

Parents often describe it as the most terrifying day of their life: Their child has just been removed from their care and they don't know when they will see them again, where he or she will live, or what they need to do to regain custody. Parents usually arrive at the first dependency court hearing terrified and overwhelmed. The courtroom can be intimidating and isolating, as the professionals there to help them are often too busy with other cases to explain the complexities of the legal system they are now expected to navigate. This initial experience can leave parents feeling defeated, helpless, and thoroughly confused.

For parents in Washington, however, there is a powerful program designed to set them up for success. During that first court hearing, a parent ally who has successfully navigated the dependency system is standing by. They introduce themselves as someone who has been in their shoes and has overcome difficult challenges to reunify with their children. They then offer guidance through the many steps of the process.

Parent advocates lift up historically silent voices — those of the parents whose lives and children are impacted by the decisions of the child protection agency. In fact, most of the current staff and volunteers with [Parents for Parents](#) once sat in a



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courtroom, close to losing their own children. Now they are back, but this time seeking to improve the system for other families.

## By parents, for parents

The Children's Home Society of Washington's Parents for Parents program was founded over 10 years ago by Brenda Lopez, a Washington state mother whose children were removed from her care. Lopez felt alone and confused during the entire process, without anyone who could help her understand the complexities of the dependency court system. Fortunately, with the support of her church, she received the assistance that she needed to keep her children out of foster care. In order to prevent other parents from having a similar experience, Lopez partnered with a guardian ad litem from Pierce County Juvenile Court to apply for a Court Improvement Project grant. With this funding, they started a parent partnership program in Pierce County focused on demystifying the dependency court process and providing parents with ongoing support throughout their case. For the next decade, Parents for Parents used various funding streams to expand the program into eight other Washington counties, as well as two in Arizona.

## Three key components

The Children's Home Society of Washington's Parents for Parents program contains three core elements: outreach at court hearings, an educational Dependency 101 class, and ongoing peer mentoring support. Strong partnerships with all child welfare system partners, including parent attorneys, judges, and caseworkers, are required across all three elements.

### Engage immediately

A parent ally (PA) attends all shelter and dependency court hearings to connect with parents soon after their child has been removed. The PA introduces him/herself as someone with similar life experience who overcame obstacles to reunify with their children. This gives parents someone they can relate to and offers

them hope that reunification is possible. Since parents are often in a heightened emotional state at the first hearing, **parent allies help diffuse negative attitudes or defensive behavior and encourage parents to be open-minded and engage in the process.** This, in turn, ensures that judges and other professionals involved with the case have a positive first interaction with the parent.

"The parent advocates are there bridging the gap and changing perceptions of families with lived experiences and parents currently involved in child welfare for caseworkers, judges, attorneys and other stakeholders," says Alise Hegle, advocacy lead for Children's Home Society of Washington and a parent ally. Parent allies share their contact information with the parent, urge them to attend the Dependency 101 Class, and offer to be a resource and mentor.

### Empower with knowledge

The programs' foundation is a two-hour parent-led Dependency 101 class offered to all parents whose children have been removed and/or who are navigating a dependency case. This class explains the dependency process, what parents should expect, and what is expected of them in order to reunify with their children. Parent allies serve as translators, breaking down the bureaucratic requirements into more accessible language parents can understand. They go over a list of dos (do show up to every hearing, document everything, ask for more help when you need it) and don'ts (don't emote when you hear something disagreeable, don't overreact). They also share their own stories of reunification, including tips and strategies to help parents navigate the system, and answer any questions. Other key players, such as the defense attorney, social worker, and court appointed special advocate, attend the class to explain their roles and how they can support parents. Most importantly, all presenters emphasize a **shared message that reunification is the number one goal for everyone involved.**

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Dependency 201 classes, which are ongoing support groups and skill building classes, and Dependency 301, when parents meet to perform monthly community service and enjoy healthy family activities, have also been established in a number of counties.

## Guiding the journey

Parent allies know firsthand that reunification is a challenging, drawn-out process, with lots of ups and downs. They provide parents with follow-up support and mentoring over the telephone. **They work with parents at any point in their journey to offer guidance, advice, or advocacy**, ensuring parents have the resources and information needed to complete their court-ordered services and work through any anger, resentment, or confusion regarding the process or their case. Parent allies also help steer parents to services such as drug treatment, counseling and health care, housing, or rental assistance.

## Making a difference

Based on evaluation findings from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) in 2011 and 2013, the King County Superior Court's Parents for Parents Program was identified as a promising practice by the University of Washington's Evidence Based Practice Institute.<sup>1</sup> Key findings include:

- Increased compliance with the court-ordered case plan by both mothers and fathers, including visitation;
- Increased participation by the mother at key court events; and,
- Increased likelihood of reunification and decreased likelihood of termination of parental rights for white families who participated in Dependency 101.

In 2014, Partners for Our Children **analyzed rates of reunification in counties with Parents for Parents programs and found these rates are significantly higher than for comparable families in counties in which there is not yet a Parents for Parents program.**<sup>2</sup> As a result, Washington has saved money — each time a dependency case is resolved quickly, the state has incurred lower foster care costs.

PAs also benefit, gaining entry-level employment training and experience including key life and job skills. For many, Parents for Parents work has led to full-time employment in the community and the end of their reliance on public assistance.

Based on the program's success, the Washington State Parent Ally Committee helped to pass a bill in the Legislature to support the program's sustainability. This 2015 legislation improved the service models for existing Parents for Parents programs and provided funding to expand into new sites, with the Office for Public Defense distributing the funds and the Children's Home Society of Washington administering the program. The bill also directed a child welfare research entity to evaluate the program.

Since the legislation passed, five other counties have implemented or are in the process of implementing a Parents for Parents program, bringing the total to 13 counties, with many more expressing interest. Children's Home Society of Washington provides each of these programs with technical assistance to ensure that Parents for Parents is implemented with fidelity. In order to receive state funding, the county program must have a host organization (either the county court or a local nonprofit agency), a part- or full-time PA coordinator, and additional paid volunteer PAs that receive a stipend for their time.

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## Learning along the way

The following lessons learned emerged over the past 10 years:



### Address systemic issues along the way

No matter how committed parents may be to reunification, systemic barriers are often in place that are out of parents' control. For example, incarcerated parents are often unable to attend court hearings or participate in visitation, which may negatively impact a court's perception of that parent's commitment. In response to this barrier, the Parents for Parents program was expanded to the King County jail, with Dependency 101 classes offered for incarcerated mothers and fathers. According to Hegle, these systemic barriers must be removed for parents to be successful: "You are working with people on an individual level while clearly seeing the systemic barriers that are affecting them — racial inequity, gender issues, housing insecurity, that all comes up at the same time for these families."



### Reinforce positivity

Parents often hold a negative perception of child protective services, reinforced by stories from friends, family, or other community members who have lost their children to the system. Many have had adversarial interactions with social services agencies, including child welfare, and believe that no matter what they do, nothing will be good enough for reunification. PAs work hard to instill hope and confidence in birth parents, encourage attendance at substance abuse treatment, and help them enroll in school, communicating that parents are competent, worthy, and taking positive steps forward.



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## Identify the essential characteristics of effective parent allies

Each parent ally approaches the work differently, but all are deeply committed to birth parents and believe in their ability to change and safely reunify with their children. Successful PAs have accepted responsibility for the reasons their children came into care and don't harbor resentment toward the child welfare system, which allows them to help parents deal with their own anger and resentment. A positive social network and healthy lifestyle enable PAs to stay emotionally strong as they help parents through many of the same challenges they had to overcome. Most importantly, parent allies are solution-focused, so they can help parents seek effective strategies to overcome barriers. While they offer hope and guidance to birth parents, PAs also hold them accountable for the attitudes and actions necessary for safe and timely reunification.



## Advance strong partnership with the courts

Courts serve as the location of the initial attempt at parent engagement, and frequently become the host organization for a new program as it is being developed and implemented. Hence, effective parent partner programs nurture strong collaboration with courts. It is also important to assess the court environment before bringing in a Parents for Parents program, both to ensure sufficient space and to promote strong collaboration between parent allies and the court.



## Break stigmas and change perceptions

In addition to helping parents on their individual cases, Parents for Parents programs also support culture shifts over time, as judges, caseworkers, and attorneys come to view birth parents in a different light and believe that they are capable of meaningful and lasting change.

1 See [http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/1672/Wsipp\\_Updated-Inventory-of-Evidence-Based-Research-Based-and-Promising-Practices-For-Prevention-and-Intervention-Services-for-Children-and-Juveniles-in-the-Child-Welfare-Juvenile-Justice-and-Mental-Health-Systems\\_Report.pdf](http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/1672/Wsipp_Updated-Inventory-of-Evidence-Based-Research-Based-and-Promising-Practices-For-Prevention-and-Intervention-Services-for-Children-and-Juveniles-in-the-Child-Welfare-Juvenile-Justice-and-Mental-Health-Systems_Report.pdf)

2 Newby, M., & Thomas, G. (2015). Parents for Parents (P4P) Program (Unpublished report). Seattle, WA: Partners for Our Children, University of Washington School of Social Work.

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