

**2017 CSAC Challenge Awards Entry:
Parent Partner Program of Contra Costa County
Employment & Human Services Department / Child Abuse Prevention Council**

Overview: The Parent Partner Program matches parents in the foster care system with Parent Partners who successfully overcame their own struggles and reunified with their children.

Challenge: Parents dealing with extreme life challenges such as substance abuse and domestic violence that result in their children being taken from them do not always have resources to help navigate a complex child welfare system. Often they are not aware of their rights and responsibilities, and do not have role models or support networks in place to provide the appropriate guidance and “voice” that may support reunification with their children. As they and their children enter the Child Welfare system, they are facing detention, court appearances, possibly alcohol or drug testing and rehabilitation. They must begin working on a Case Plan to deal with emotional and mental health issues, securing a job to have a steady income, finding a place to live and creating a safe, stable environment to move toward reunification. In many cases, reunification is not a viable option because neither the father nor mother possesses the life skills or means to obtain them due to lack of resources, education and/or mentors. The absence of positive role models, nurturing environments, sound guidance, and effective interventions results in the cycle of interpersonal violence, substance abuse and/or neglect persisting within families. Therefore, children who fall into the foster care system have little or no chance of being reunited with their biological/legal parents when it may be the best possible outcome for them and their families.

Innovative Solution: As the result of a five-year System of Care infrastructure building grant almost 15 years ago, Children & Family Services (CFS) in Contra Costa County explored making changes within the county’s child welfare framework. The bureau of the county’s Employment & Human Services Department took a critical look at what “business as usual” elements had outlived their usefulness and asked “what if?” What if they empowered parents and let them choose to have a Parent Partner? What if they worked with fathers as enthusiastically as with mothers? What if Parent Partners worked with families in their own communities, were always available and never closed a case? What if they help parents develop a positive relationship with the foster parent, attorney, and social worker?

This began the development of a model, and the hiring of Parent Partners who could be supportive and nurturing, and yet explain to parents the realities of their situations in a “straight talk” way. Parent Partners take calls when parents are feeling discouraged – maybe on a child’s birthday or a holiday – often during off hours. Parent Partners, believing that people who know better do better, coach parents and teach them skills to be successful. They reach out to fathers who feel

marginalized, parents in substance abuse treatment programs, and those in the County Detention Facilities. The Parent Partners offer hope and can honestly say, "If I could get my children back, so can you. Let me show you how."

In 2008, CFS collaborated with the Child Abuse Prevention Council (CAPC) of Contra Costa County which administers the program. It is still housed in the county facilities, enabling seamless interfacing with county staff and services.

Originality: Peer support was already being used effectively in Childrens' Mental Health and had just started being considered in child welfare in 2003. There were no effective models of peer support in California child welfare programs and no evidence to prove that this new approach would work. CFS in Contra Costa County reached out to staff, parents, community partners, service providers and attorneys in order to design a model that would respect a family's culture, engage fathers, empower parents to identify their own needs and make decisions for their family. The Parent Partner Program is a totally voluntarily program designed to "meet parents where they are at," while coaching and guiding them as they make positive life changes. Parent Partners do not in any way replace social workers, but rather, work alongside them as an additional support *to* the parent and *for* the social worker.

Cost Effectiveness: Not having a successful parent incurs great costs to the county in terms of emotional hardships on family members and ongoing reliance on services. The Parent Partner Program diminishes this impact by supporting healthy family relationships, assisting parents with securing employment, establishing home ownership, and therefore adding to the tax base.

Results: After 12 years of working with families, the Parent Partner Program in Contra Costa County is a shining example in California and throughout the nation of how a client-centered approach can work to achieve better outcomes for children and families. Parents who had Parent Partners are about 50 percent more likely to be reunified with their children and 50 percent less likely to experience recidivism. Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program has become a national model for peer support programs. It has been modified and replicated in various counties in California and throughout the United States. Recently, the model received international attention and is under consideration to be replicated in Australia

Program Contacts: Kathy Marsh at (925) 313-1583 (kmarsh@ehsd.cccounty.us)
Judith Knittel at (925) 602-6956 (jknittel@ehsd.cccounty.us)

Optional Submission: Video featuring David Mason, one of eleven Parent Partners who teach other parents how to leverage services and create safe, healthy environments while becoming self-sufficient. Please see enclosed CD or view at link: https://www.youtube.com/v/QC3Rm_1wtbM