

## After Care

### I wish my service plan had prepared me for reunification

BY SHARKKARAH HARRISON

#### AFTER SPENDING FOUR

years in foster care, my 7-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter were trial discharged to me in time for Christmas 2015.

The family shelter I was in with my 9-month-old baby wasn't our idea of home, but my kids were happy just to be back with me and excited about their new brother.

It was the happiest day of our lives.

It was also the saddest, because a big part of our family was still missing—my oldest daughter, 9, didn't come home with her brother and sister.

She chose to be adopted by her foster mother.

#### ANGRY AT THE WORLD

My kids were placed in care because I used excessive corporal punishment. Back then, I was angry at the world—angry that I was broke and homeless and didn't have support because I too had grown up in foster care. I was so overwhelmed by my life that when my kids acted up, I disciplined them the only way I knew.

Then, during the case, my 9-year-old told her caseworker that she had been molested.

I'd also been molested as a child and I felt worthless because I'd failed to protect my daughter. It hurt so bad that I tried to commit suicide.

Once I got better and learned how to heal and help myself, I fought for my daughter and I fought to be able to attend counseling together.



Sharkkarah and her kids

PHOTO BY TK

I wanted to help her heal. I used the time to listen to her talk about her pain and how mad she was at me.

In the end, she chose not to come home.

#### MOURNING

My son and youngest daughter were very upset when they got home and I told them about their sister's decision. They looked up to her and after so much time in separate foster homes they couldn't wait to live with her again.

That first night together, we talked about how much their sister meant to us as tears flowed from our eyes. I let them go through their emotions until we all fell asleep in my bed.

I knew we had a lot to process as

a family and that we needed to heal while putting our lives back together. A lot had happened to us in four years.

#### GROWING PAINS

While I was doing my services and trying to get the help that I knew I needed in order to get my kids back, they were growing up and dealing with their own challenges.

When my son went into care at 2, he had a speech impediment, but by the time he was 6, the agency had him diagnosed with ADHD and a learning disability. Later on I found out that my youngest daughter also had ADHD.

They'd also both been abused in one of the five foster homes they were placed in. When I found out,

I'd immediately had them removed, but the damage was done.

As my children grew, I saw their behavior change in ways that showed me they were in a lot of pain.

They would throw tantrums during visits and in the foster home. My son went from having a smile on his face to being quiet and withdrawn. My daughter, who once loved to get dressed up, no longer cared about her appearance.

#### UNPREPARED

I found a trauma-focused therapist who helped me to understand my kids' behavior. She told me that I should prepare myself for life with kids suffering from ADHD and trauma.

But I wish I'd understood exactly how prepared I needed to be. Now I know we could've used trauma-focused family therapy and individual therapy for each child. I wish that once my case reached trial discharge, those services were put in place to help us cope with life after foster care.

Instead, CPS ordered me to remain under supervision and continue the same services—therapy and psych—for a year.

#### TANTRUMS AND TEARS

The first few months back together as a family were great.

We spent all of our time together—we watched movies, played music and danced, colored and went to the park.

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## IN THIS ISSUE

### (SERVICE) PLANNING FOR YOUR FUTURE

Once a child is removed from home, service plans (or case plans) become a crucial part of a parent's life. Whether parents complete services and change behaviors are the deciding factors in determining whether a child returns home.

Far too often, service planning leaves parents out and ignores the realities in their lives. In this issue, parents, caseworkers and attorneys share ideas about how to meet parents where they are and prepare them for successful reunification.

Stories in this issue were developed in writing workshops at the Center for Family Representation and Graham Windham, and through a workshop for frontline staff at Sheltering Arms.

**RISE** trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and to guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

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## FIRST PERSON

*Continued from page 1*

I was so happy that I spoiled my kids with toys, candy and fast food. But when I couldn't afford to give them those things anymore, they started to behave in ways that I wasn't prepared for. They cursed, fought, lied, broke things and stole.

They would kick and scream at me, and say that they hated me and that I sent them to foster care because I didn't want them. They said they didn't want to live with me and once they actually tried to leave the shelter.

At times, my children were so out of control that I would cancel appointments because they didn't want to leave the house. Their tantrums lasted up to an hour. If we were on the street or on the bus it would escalate.

It was so shocking and embarrassing that at times I would lash out and scream at them. But mostly I would just start sobbing with my baby strapped to my chest and say, "Lord, please help me." I loved my kids, but I hated not having control.

### TREATMENT GAPS

I was also nervous because, as my case got closer to final discharge, my caseworker told me that the agency would no longer give me refills for my kids' ADHD medication. I had to switch them to my insurance and find a local mental health clinic.

I asked for a referral to a local mental health clinic but all my worker gave me was the information for my local emergency room.

Throughout my case, I had found my own services whenever I felt the agency's providers weren't helping me make progress. I also fought for my right to make educational and medical decisions for my kids while they were in foster care. So I knew what to do.

But this was the first time in four years that I'd had to deal with my kids 24 hours a day. Things got chaotic and the stress piled on. The hospital where I got their meds for a while

refused to give me any more without my kids being seen by a therapist. Then there were waiting lists for services. Meanwhile, because my kids were inconsistent with their therapy and medication, their behavior got worse.

My family felt as fragile as it had ever been.

**As my children grew, I saw their behavior change in ways that showed me they were in a lot of pain.**

### LIVING IN FEAR

By the time we reached final discharge, I'd made some progress. I'd moved into my very first apartment and started working part-time at Rise.

It felt good to have a real home and a job but every day was a struggle.

My kids would act out in school. It got so bad that their school started calling me almost every day with a complaint. I'd have to leave work to go pick them up. Sometimes I wouldn't even be able to go to work because of their tantrums. One time, the school sent my son to the hospital because he was tearing up the classroom.

The school wasn't very understanding, even though they were aware of my kids' history. They put my son in Special Ed and wanted to leave him back a grade, which I fought to prevent. They said they couldn't control my daughter and tried to kick her out of the school. I also prevented that.

The more problems my kids had at school, the more I lived in fear that CPS would come back into our lives. I didn't want anyone to know about our challenges because I was afraid that CPS would say that I couldn't take care of my kids and remove them again.

Every time there was a knock on our door, the kids would get scared that it was a social worker coming to get them.

### IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

When my children were in foster care, the system focused on making sure that I did the services that would address the issue that caused them to be removed—my anger. But the agency didn't seem concerned about how much my kids had changed while in care and how their traumatic experiences in foster care would affect us all once we were reunified.

I often think about how, when I was in a single women's shelter, the caseworker helped me create an emergency plan called an Independent Living Plan. It was similar to CPS' service plan but I defined my own individual needs and goals. I also made a plan for what to do and where to go when things got really hard and I needed help.

I wish CPS had helped me make a family reunification plan like that. I wish I'd had conferences where I was introduced to community resources, family service programs, support groups for parents with children returning from foster care and trauma-focused family counseling.

I only recently accepted that my children won't ever be the same as they were before foster care. When I think about the pain and fear I see in my kids' eyes every single day, it cuts deep into my heart.

### HANDLE WITH LOVING CARE

My therapist once told me that I may never be able to take away my children's pain but that I could create new memories to replace the old ones. I could show them in many ways how much I love them and will be there to support them throughout their struggles.

I hope that with time and a lot of loving care we will be able to heal together as a family and strengthen our bond even more. I also hope that one day I will be able to say with confidence that we have healed from our trauma and are living life as a happy family. ■

# Critical Planning

INTERVIEWS BY STAFF

*For parents trying to reunify with their children, completing the service plan within the 15 months allowed by federal law can feel like an uphill battle, filled with demands, court dates, conferences and impossible expectations. For parents struggling with trauma, mental illness, addiction, incarceration, poverty, shame and even anger at the system, it can take years to fully comply and reunify with their children.*

*Here David Meyers, an attorney and Chief Operating Officer at Dependency Legal Services in California; Kaela Economos, senior social worker at Brooklyn Defender Services in NYC, Cara Finney, CPS supervisor, and Liz Berringer, caseworker, in Fairfield County, Ohio, explain the difficulties in service planning and what can be done to remove the barriers that parents face while navigating the most crucial plan of their lives.*

**Q: What is a service plan (or case plan) and what challenges do parents face?**

**Economos:** It's the steps that CPS wants the parent to take in order to address the issue that caused a child's removal—attend therapy, parenting classes or other services.

**Meyers:** Parents are often overwhelmed with the volume of services; many are dealing with a lot of crisis and instability in their lives. A simple thing like getting to services in areas where there's no public transportation can be a big obstacle. Also, new information can cause services to be added on. Workers are constantly accused of raising the bar by parents who say, "I do what you ask me and you

constantly tell me it's not enough." These things can cause parents to disengage from services.

**Economos:** For families living in poverty, 15 months is not a long time to get yourself together. You can be on waitlists for months to get services and housing. We also see the same cookie-cutter process in determining services regardless of what's going on in the family. The agencies are asking people to do things that are not useful to the parent but that take up a lot of time. Some plans ask for weekly drug tests when there was no allegation of drug use.

**Finney:** Our workers are linking families to whatever services they need as soon as they come to the agency. We also link them to a peer mentor, who along with the worker meets with the parent weekly for the first sixty days, and then every other week. We discuss the services and possible barriers and come up with solutions. We make sure parents are referred to services that they can actually participate in.

**Q: How can parents have a say in service planning? Can they refuse or challenge the plan or choose their own services?**

**Finney:** There are services that we require. If you have a drug problem, you can't refuse to go to drug counseling. But we do talk with parents about which services and providers would be best for them.

**Meyers:** A lot of times when children are removed, CPS takes on the role of the parent and the dynamics between a caseworker

and a parent are very much like that of a parent and child. The parent has all the power. At the end of the day, the parent is going to make the choice for the child. But every parent in this country can and must advocate for a service plan that will be helpful to them.

**Economos:** At first the plan is just a recommendation, so it's optional up until it becomes court-ordered. If there's a problem once the plan is mandated—if it's overwhelming or services don't work with the parent's schedule or location—they should feel empowered talk to their attorney or social worker about what they need.

**Q: What is meant by "behavior change"? Why is it important and how is it measured?**

**Meyers:** It's important because the entire system is based on facilitating safer behavior and preventing the reoccurrence of abuse and neglect. If addiction is the problem and your services help you to get healthy and stop using, that's behavior change.

**Economos:** A parent could have completed three parenting classes and then in the supervised visits they are not appropriately disciplining their kids. The worker will report that the parent hasn't learned any techniques to utilize.

**Q: Parents often say they are afraid to trust their caseworkers. How important is trust between a caseworker and a parent?**

**Meyers:** In my experience, the number one predictor of success in a case is the relationship that a

parent has with their worker. It's not whether they do their services or not. It's the nature of the relationship between the person trying to reunify and the person trying to help them reunify.

**Economos:** Cases can go on for years because of toxic relationships between caseworkers and parents, and it's problematic because the courts are going to find that the parent hasn't gained any insight about what got them the case.

The system has to recognize that some of the people we are dealing with have a history of trauma and there's a fight or flight response built into them that helps them survive. We need to tell parents that we understand their anger but this is what it looks like to the worker.

**Parents aren't always where we want them to be when we meet them. We have to move forward with them when they are ready**

**Berringer:** Parents aren't always where we want them to be when we meet them. We have to move forward with them when they are ready, keeping in mind time frames. It's in a child's best interest to be with their parent so I'm willing to express to the court that they may need to take a little longer. As caseworkers, we have to take the time to build trust and relationships with the parents. We have to prove ourselves to them as much they have to prove themselves to the court. ■



# Life Support

After years of chaos, I'm moving forward with the right help

BY ANONYMOUS

**WHEN MY OLDEST** daughter went into foster care five years ago, I was 20 and struggling. I'd signed myself out of foster care two years earlier and had been bouncing between youth shelters and my mom's place.

I went into a shelter after my daughter was born, but a few months later my mother asked me to move in with her. It felt good. My mom had always been emotionally cut off from me. She placed me in foster care at 14 because she couldn't handle me acting up, cutting class and staying out late. She eventually got me diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Still, I was grateful to see how much my mom loved her granddaughter.

## BETRAYED, ABANDONED, ABUSED

Things changed when my daughter was 18 months and I started a new relationship, and quickly got pregnant. My mother and I argued; she told me to have an abortion. I packed up my baby and went to my boyfriend's place. Then my mother told CPS that I was with my daughter and without medication while dealing with a crippling illness, and my daughter was taken from me.

I felt betrayed.

Shortly after that, my boyfriend became physically abusive. I lived in terror for my entire pregnancy—I didn't have anywhere else to go and I believed that he loved me. I became very depressed, stopped going to therapy and often missed visits with my daughter.

I was allowed to take my second daughter home when she was born—with the understanding that I would be living in a shelter and staying away from my boyfriend. I

didn't do that, and shortly after I gave birth, my boyfriend and I argued and he cut my ear open with a knife and threatened to kill us all.

The court said I was putting my baby in imminent danger, and she was removed as well.

I felt worthless for losing my children. I was in such a dark place.



PHOTO BY JAMIE TAYLOR ON UNSPLASH

## DESERTED IN THE DARK

When I'd met my first caseworker, I was nervous, but she seemed genuinely concerned.

By the time my second daughter entered foster care, my worker had left the agency. I hoped that her replacement would be as caring, but she talked to me like I was too young and dumb to take care of my kids. She made me feel low for being the victim of domestic violence, but she never referred me to DV counseling or a shelter for battered women.

Months later, I had another worker. She referred me to DV counseling, but she also made me feel ashamed for being stuck in the

relationship.

It was hard to make any progress. As time passed the agency tacked on new services, but they were always the same. I completed a parenting class six times and Parenting Journey three times.

But none of those services addressed my deeper issues—instead of bipolar I had been newly diagnosed with PTSD and anxiety due to being thrown into foster care and the trauma I suffered there.

When I went and found my own trauma-focused therapy, my worker said I wasn't complying because it didn't address bipolar disorder.

I sank deeper into the dark. Some days I just couldn't get out of bed.

## LIFTED UP AND BROKEN DOWN

Things began looking up a year later when I started dating the man who is now my husband. He celebrated my successes and came with me to visits. He loved the girls and wanted to be a family, so we moved into the shelter together.

When I had my son, we were able to raise him together for two years without incident, and I attended workshops on co-parenting with an abusive ex and on self-care. Yet my daughters remained in foster care.

Then I got pregnant again.

My pregnancy was high-risk. I suffered from diabetes and edema (swelling). I was put on bed rest and didn't do services or visit my kids for most of the pregnancy.

I also was smoking weed at times.

When my daughter was born, the hospital found THC in my system and she was taken from me. The next day, a worker went by my place and said that I didn't have enough food and my house was unkempt. She removed my son.

I was broken.

## COMPASSIONATE CARE

In February 2018, five years into my case, the agency filed to terminate my rights to my oldest daughters and stopped me from seeing them. They are now 7 and 5, and are being freed for adoption in June. It kills me that I can't see them until they're 18.

But I'm trying to stay positive for my younger kids. I have a new agency, and it's been different. They've understood that the inconsistencies in my life come from the trauma I've suffered.

My new worker helped me to tailor my service plan to what's going on in my life and set clear steps. She printed it out and attached resources that she felt might benefit me.

When I let an ex back into my life and he hurt me, she didn't judge me. She helped me set a new path and find comprehensive DV counseling that helped me to see that he was manipulating me with money and the promise of love. I learned to recognize the tactics abusers use to get you to stay.

It feels good to have an agency that treats me as a partner.

## CLOSER THAN EVER

My son and youngest daughter are 3 and 1 now. I see them twice a week, sometimes more. I finally have an apartment and it looks like we are closer than ever to reunification.

Still, I get upset with myself because if I had pushed as hard as I do now, believed in myself and had people who believed in me, I know my older daughters would be coming home, too.

# Truth Without Fear

## When your child's in care, honesty and dishonesty are both risky

BY IASHA GAINES

**EARLIER THIS YEAR,** I sat down with a mother, her case planner and her CPS investigator. I was the supervisor on the case. The CPS worker began by stating that the mother was suffering from paranoia and because of that, wasn't allowing her son to go to school.

The mother shook her head in disagreement, but waited until the CPS worker had finished talking. Then I said that I had seen her shaking her head and asked if she could describe what had happened.

She admitted what no one had known—that she'd had some domestic violence issues with her youngest son's father. Because of that, she started homeschooling her oldest son to keep him safe, but the school called in a report on her for educational neglect.

When CPS sent her to have a psychiatric evaluation, she'd broken down. That's when they admitted her to the hospital and placed her children in care.

She looked me in my eyes and said, "I love my kids and I will get them back." Then she began to cry.

Maybe in other situations, telling us her problems with domestic violence could have made it harder for her to bring her children home. But in this case, the information meant we were able to make a safety plan with her—and return her children to her in five weeks.

### LACK OF TRUST, LACK OF PROGRESS

That kind of openness is rare. Instead, I hear parents say all the time: "I don't trust my worker," while parent attorneys tell their clients, "Only tell them what you have to," or, "Don't admit to anything or it will be used against you."

On the one hand, that attitude

makes sense. It's a risk being honest with a worker when you don't know if what you share will extend the time your children stay in care. Other times, parents hide their struggles because they're just not ready or able to do what they have to do to bring their children home. They feel ashamed, and afraid of admitting how much they're struggling.

But I also see the risks of not being honest.

When case planners only learn important information about a client

that's why she'd missed the visits.

I felt an obligation to ask if she was OK but I was also skeptical about her story because she'd already reported several times that she'd hurt herself to avoid random drug screenings. When she did come into the office, her test was usually positive.

I also felt upset. I knew this mother had the ability to really care for her children.

When she came for visits, her children's faces would light up.



PHOTO BY STEVEN ZESWITZ

a year into the case, and then have to make a referral for an issue they never knew about, it's almost like starting the case all over. It's like getting to third base and having to go back to first.

### LOVE AND LIES

The barriers to honesty make it difficult for parents and workers to make progress.

Back when I was a case planner, a parent called me who had not visited her children in two weeks. On the phone, she told me she'd fallen down a flight of stairs and

She'd open her arms and welcome all of their hugs at once. Only her youngest daughter, 4, would stay close to the foster mother. For her, mom would get down on her knees to be eye to eye and ask for a hug.

She would ask her children how school was, tell them that she loved them and speak about positive memories. They would eat, play games, play music, dance and laugh.

### PAIN BEHIND THE LIES

But her children had also been in care for almost two years.

So I said, "I know when you get

injured you must care for yourself first, but it would help to let us know in the morning when you won't be arriving so that the children don't travel all this way just to not see their mommy. It's difficult for them and they look sad."

She said, "I know," in a low tone.

Then she told me she had been feeling depressed, that she didn't want to leave her house. I knew dealing with depression had been difficult for her in the past.

But I also thought she might be staying away because she'd been using drugs.

If she had been honest about it, I would have encouraged her to visit anyway. If it were up to me, I would have put an in-house program in place so that she and her children could be reunited while she worked on her addiction and mental health.

But the truth is that case planners don't have ultimate control over the consequences when a parent chooses to be honest. Supervisors make decisions, while judges make the ultimate decisions.

### WE NEED CHANGE

In order to support families, those of us working in child welfare need to figure out how to make it safer for parents to be honest.

Case planners could start by explaining to parents the risks and benefits of being honest from the first face-to-face contact. If we did this, parents might be better able to build a relationship with us.

I also think everyone in the system needs to work together to reward parents for being honest. We need to find ways to communicate to parents that if they fail or fall, they can get up and try again. ■

# Case Control

## Your rights in service planning

BY KEYNA FRANKLIN AND SHARKKARAH HARRISON

*Parents who feel powerless during the service planning process often accept services, schedules and other demands placed on them by the child welfare system that they can't do or don't believe will be helpful because they aren't informed or are too afraid to speak up. It's important and empowering for parents to know that they have rights in their family's planning and how to assert them.*

*Rise spoke to Kaela Economos, social work director at Brooklyn Defender Services, Diana Rugh Johnson, a child welfare law specialist and substitute Family Court judge in Georgia, and Malena Arnaud, senior social worker at the Center For Family Representation, about the ways in which parents can control aspects of their planning process.*

**Q: From a legal perspective, what should a service plan look like?**

**Arnaud:** A service plan should be based solely on the original allegations of the case. If there are new concerns that come up throughout the case, any new services should be relevant to those concerns and not just random.

**Rugh Johnson:** Sometimes all the safety issues aren't known at first. It's not uncommon for a child to be removed for something like housing instability and then it's discovered that there's a drug problem with the parent. If that's the case, services will be added. Every state has its own laws, but when that happens, I require the agency to file an amended petition to prove those new safety issues just like they had to do at the beginning of the case.

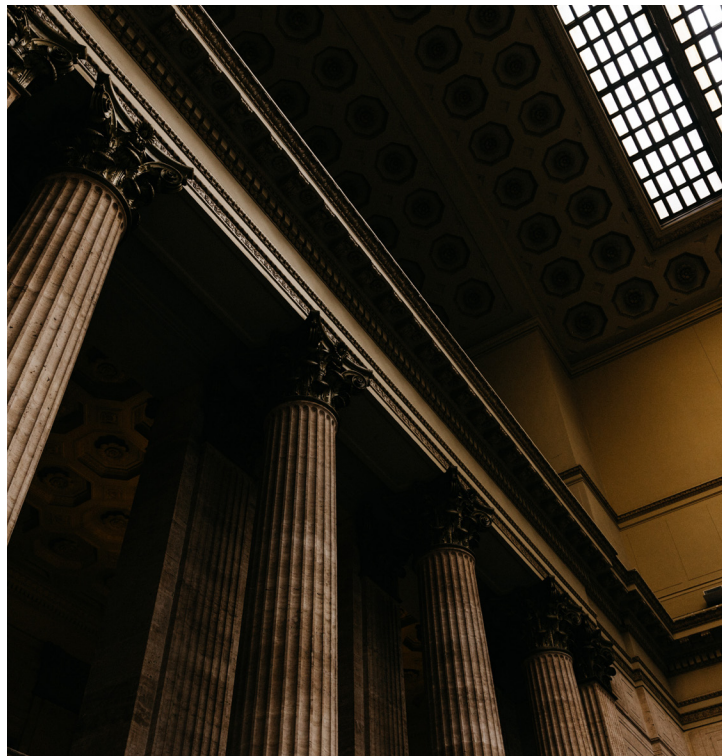


PHOTO BY PATRICK FORE ON UNSPLASH

**Q: Can parents change, challenge or refuse a service plan? If so, is there a time frame to do so?**

**Rugh Johnson:** A case plan is not legally mandatory until the court orders it. So you can challenge or refuse a service plan up until the disposition.

But beginning services right away rather than waiting for them to be court-ordered buys the parent more time on that clock. It also shows initiative, which looks good for their case by the time it gets to court and moves the case forward quicker.

**Economos:** Usually by the time we meet parents, they have already agreed to certain services, but we will definitely advocate for changes

in the service plan if the parent feels that it doesn't work for them. Service plans are also revisited at the follow-up conference and then at any Family Team Conference that happens throughout the life of the case, so every meeting is an opportunity for the parent to revise the plan.

But parents should know that a service plan is like a contract. So if you agreed to do a service, even without it being court-ordered, and you don't do it, CPS or the foster care agency has the option of escalating their actions. For instance, even though NYC has a policy that says that compliance with services should not be used as a bargaining tool for increased or restricted visits, visitation is often tied to compliance.

**Q: Are parents required to sign the HIPPA form that lets the agency communicate with their service providers? Are there consequences for not signing it?**

**Arnaud:** Medical records are protected and private. You don't have to release that information to anyone.

**Economos:** At the same time, not signing could prolong your case. CPS could say, "We can't give you more visits unless you're going to therapy and you won't sign a HIPPA so I can't contact your mental health center."

Talk to your attorney before signing HIPPA or any other form. If you do decide to sign, never sign a blank form. The agency should state specifically who they are requesting the information from, what information they are requesting and specific dates in question.

**Q: Even if parents are doing all their services, can parents' anger toward a caseworker be used against them? Can it lead parents to be given more services?**

**Economos:** Years ago, NYC issued mental health principals that stated that angry and defensive behaviors toward caseworkers should not be defined as a mental illness. Does that mean that child protective workers or caseworkers on the ground get this? No.

**Q: What roles does an attorney have in service planning?**

**Economos:** Attorneys advocate for the client's wishes and rights. We make sure that they are getting a service plan that fits their needs and only addresses the allegations in the case. ■



# Group Think

## When parents are supported to participate, workers can make better decisions

BY CARMEN SANCHEZ

### RECENTLY, I FACILITATED

a Family Team Meeting with a mother who was going through tremendous stress. Her partner had recently died and she'd been diagnosed with a serious illness. She also suffered from anxiety and depression.

Up until these crises in her life, she'd worked, had an apartment, cared for her daughter. But after, she started losing interest in life and hoarding belongings in ways that were dangerous. Her daughter, 12, had developmental and cognitive disabilities. Eventually she was removed from her mother. Mom blamed everyone and was aggressive toward every case planner.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES

Before the meeting, I felt anxious because dealing with aggression is one of my biggest challenges. But because parents' input in Family Team Meetings is often critical to coming up with the best plan for their children, over time I've learned to manage my anxiety by focusing on the parent's feelings instead of on my own.

The day of the meeting, I came early to welcome mom.

She looked angry and anxious, avoiding eye contact. I wanted to open conversation and validate her feelings so I asked about her commute and how she felt coming to the meeting. Mom said she did not want to come because no one understood her.

When the meeting started and I reviewed the rules, I noticed that when I said "no shaming no blaming," mom looked up.

Then I asked mom to give her version of the story. I told her that I would write notes to remember her story. She looked at me, surprised.

Then she started crying, as if she wasn't expecting anyone to care what she had to say. I offered her tissues and we waited in silence until she was ready to talk.



PHOTO BY JELLEKE VANOOTEGHEM ON UNSPLASH

### LISTENING FOR STRENGTHS

She talked about how she and her daughter used to go to Broadway shows and the park, and read together.

As she talked I told her, "I hear you," and said how hard it must be for her to go through this.

She felt comfortable enough to talk about how her recent struggles impacted her and her daughter. She showed that even when she was not able to really care for her daughter properly, she'd reached out for help. She'd hired a babysitter and eventually she reached out to her daughter's half-sister, who became her foster mother. She didn't like her too much, but she was able to work with her for the sake of her daughter.

Listening to her, I thought how often we focus on parents' struggles and not on their strengths.

### MAKING SPACE FOR PAIN AND ANGER

Next, it was time to discuss the risks. When I started reading out

the case planner's concerns, which included mom's mental health issues and the safety of the home, mom started screaming and calling people names. I think she felt overwhelmed

by wanting her daughter, by all her losses, by all the bad things being held up for everyone to see.

I felt sad and unable to approach her. But I observed some participants making faces like they were expecting her to act that way, or like she was offending them. I felt upset. Those of us who work in child welfare should be more educated about mental illness.

Finally I asked mom if she wanted to take a break.

### BUILDING HOPE

Before she walked out, I told her it was extremely important for her to return. We needed her to help us plan for her daughter. She left with the social worker who worked with her legal provider. Ten minutes later, she returned seeming calmer.

I reminded mom of her strengths and I told her we could use those strengths in creating a permanency plan for her daughter. But I also told her that everyone at the conference has a voice, and that now was the

time to focus on concerns that others had. I had noticed mom smile recalling the activities she used to do with her daughter. I told her that we wanted to bring those beautiful moments back but to do that we needed to address her own and the agency's concerns.

### HELPING MOM HEAR

After that, we worked together to find solutions.

Once we arranged for mom to visit her child at the foster home rather than the agency, which was less stressful for her, she agreed to go to therapy after work, which before she'd said she was too stressed to do.

Mom also wanted to take part in her daughter's education. The foster mother agreed that she and mom could visit the daughter's school together.

Because the child was in a kinship foster home, we also decided to discuss in court changing the goal to KinGap, a guardianship agreement that would allow the daughter to stay with her half-sister until a judge deemed she could return to her mom, but without child welfare involvement.

### EMPOWERED TO DO BETTER

After the conference, I took lunch to recover.

I thought about this mom's losses, and about how strong she was to get up from her bed to come to the meeting and to return to the meeting after she got so upset.

Parents with mental illness struggle with their illness and with accepting that they need help. When we remove their children from them, it can make it challenging for them to continue with services. But when we remind them of their strengths, we can empower them to do better. ■

# Mommy Time

## I had to change for my children's sake

BY MELISSA LANDRAU

**I WAS ANGRY** at the world when CPS took my daughters Melanie, 8 months, and Amaya, 1 week old. I'd always wanted to avoid my kids going into foster care because my brother and I were raised in care.

But it was a struggle being 21 with two kids and no support. My relationship with their father was abusive and I was broke and homeless, sleeping in the streets. I robbed stores to buy pampers, milk and clothes.

It was stressful. I was hungry and depressed all the time.

I was also upset that my family was calling CPS, claiming that I was going to hurt my kids. In one report, my cousin claimed she heard me say that I would jump off a bridge with my kids.

It was frustrating. I confided in my family and turned to them for help, but they just kept calling CPS until my kids were placed with my aunt, and I was taken for mental health observation.

### A LIFETIME OF DISORDER

I'd spent time in a mental hospital as a child after being diagnosed with personality and mood disorders. My behavior was erratic because I was always off and on with my meds and therapy. By the time I aged out of foster care I was out on the streets, stealing, fighting and getting high.

I was doing the same things when I had my daughters.

My family decided to take my kids because they didn't know what I was capable of.

### ANGER AND PAIN KEPT ME AWAY

I was so angry that people believed I was capable of hurting my kids that I didn't want to hear what anyone in the system had to say. The first time

I went to court I screamed at the worker, telling her that they use parents' mental health against them.

I also refused to do what they asked of me, which was visit my kids, attend a domestic violence group and go to therapy.

### I knew I needed the services, but I was at my lowest point.

I was focused on my kids' father even though the constant fighting between us depressed me and I felt like I would never get my kids back because I was weak and unsteady. I told myself that I didn't deserve them and that I should give up. So I buried my feelings and continued getting drunk and high.

I didn't see my kids for the first three months of my case.

I wish I understood back then that I had a time period to get my kids back. I might not have wasted that time.



Melissa and her oldest daughters

### A CHANCE FOR CHANGE

The man I'm now married to helped me to see that I needed to change. He had been in my life before my kids' father and he helped me realize

that my behavior was affecting my kids and that I could lose them forever.

His support helped me to quit smoking and drinking, and to start taking my meds and visiting my kids.

But after six months I fell off by dealing with my ex again. He was my kids' father and I really wanted a traditional family. Nothing had changed with him, but I still spent the next year going back and forth between him and my husband.

I went back to my old ways, and disappeared from my case and my kids for months at a time.

When I did show up, I was hostile with everyone, especially my worker. I was always yelling and threatening her.

### SCARED STRAIGHT

The summer of 2015, I returned to my husband. We moved into the shelter and life got more stable. But a few months later, the court filed to terminate my parental rights.

I was scared. I thought I had more time. The TPR made me realize what I had to do.

I quit drinking and smoking, did my services and got back on my meds. I moved to a shelter by myself so that I could qualify for housing. I started visiting my kids.

I also found out I was pregnant. That made me even more determined to get my daughters back.

### CHANGE MY KIDS COULD BELIEVE IN

Visiting my kids again was emotional. They were angry at me. My oldest daughter showed her feelings by getting fussy and aggravated. When I would say, "I love you," she would say, "I don't want you to love me."

To win them back, I had to show

them that I missed them and that I understood why they were mad at me.

I played with them and I read to them and talked to them. I gave them affection. I also didn't miss any more visits. I won their trust back by showing I'd changed.

I was consistent up until I gave birth to my twins in August 2016, so the judge gave me a suspended judgment—I got an extra year to do what I needed to do to bring my daughters home. During that time, I moved from supervised to unsupervised visits, and then overnight.

### A NEW FAMILY PLAN

I loved having my kids overnight, but it made me realize that having all four children together was too much for me. I just couldn't do it.

I suggested KinGap for them—my aunt became their guardian. In July 2017, my case was closed.

It took three years but I learned that I did need help. I was neglecting my daughters, not in the way the court said but in ways they didn't know about, like us sleeping in parks.

Today, my twins are almost 2 and Melanie and Amaya are 5 and 4. I see them once a month. They play with their siblings and we all play together. We also read and go for long walks.

I still don't get along with my aunt, but because of the love they have with her I maintain respect and conversation. My kids are happy.

If they're happy, I'm happy. ■



# Power to the Parent

A NYC program puts service planning in the hands of parents and provides peer support

INTERVIEWS BY JEANETTE VEGA

*Parents fighting to reunite with their kids often feel like they have no say in their family's service planning and are given services without being asked what they need. Many also feel alone in the process.*

*Several child protective agencies across the nation have responded by implementing family conferencing and parent advocate programs.*

*Michael Arsham, director of The Office of Advocacy for NYC's Administration for Children's Services, spoke to Rise about NYC's Enhanced Family Conferencing Initiative (EFCI), a program that increases the number of parent advocates available to help parents from the initial Child Safety Conference, through to the 30-day follow-up conference.*

## Q: What is the Enhanced Family Conferencing Initiative program?

**A:** It's a service model that really sprang from the grassroots—developed by parents for parents. Advocates were saying that they wanted an ongoing relationship with the family, that the one-time contact in the initial conference was too limiting and that parents were calling them asking, “Can you go to this agency with me? Can you go to court with me?” And they were having to say, “No, we're not contracted to do that.” This allows the advocates to spend about 10 hours with the family in between conferences, usually helping them to implement the recommendations that came out of the safety conference.

The second part is that the initial Child Safety Conference now includes caucusing or private family time. After child protective services lays out the safety issue and maybe makes some suggestions about services, they leave the room and the family—along

with the parent advocate—then develops their own service plan. The resulting service plans are less generic and more centered on what the family says they want and need. Our commitment is to honor that plan as long as it doesn't compromise child safety. In a free society, people have a right to participate in the decision-making that affects their lives and their children's lives. Community enfranchisement in child protective decision-making is part of a meaningful racial equity strategy in child welfare.



**ACS' Michael Arsham and Rise parent leaders Jeanette Vega and Keyna Franklin**

## Q: What are the requirements to become an advocate and how important are they to a case?

**A:** The preference is parents who have been the subject of a child protective investigation, but some have other relevant life experience such as successfully transitioning from homelessness to permanent housing, or raising a child with special needs.

They're very important. They can say, “I know how you feel and what you're going through. I've been there.” It's genuinely engaging.

Advocates also help educate

parents about their rights, responsibilities and options. They speak the language and understand the culture of ACS, and serve as go-betweens and interpreters. They also have first-hand knowledge of community resources, and are very good at matching families to the right services.

## Q: What is the relationship between the advocates and CPS staff?

**A:** Parent advocates train side-by-side with child protective personnel; this was recommended by the parent advocates themselves. They come out with a shared understanding of conference protocols and increased camaraderie.

## Q: Are ACS advocates mandated reporters?

**A:** Parent advocates are not mandated reporters by New York State law, and it's important for the advocates to be able to say to a parent, “I work with ACS but I don't work for ACS. I work for the community. I work for you.” But the ACS parent advocate does have an obligation to assure child safety, and must disclose this to the parent in their first meeting.

## Q: What impact have the advocates had?

**A:** We have seen significant correlation between the presence of a parent advocate in the Child Safety Conference and a recommendation other than foster care placement. There are many other variables that can influence the recommendation, but the consistency of these results is encouraging.

## Q: What challenges has the program faced?

**A:** Scheduling is a logistical nightmare. We currently have about 70 advocates. Ideally, parent advocates meet the family in advance of the conference and should spend about 15 minutes with them, but if there are 10 conferences at 8 a.m. and we only have five advocates stationed then we're not going to have time with the parent. That's a work in progress.

Another challenge is keeping the family engaged after the initial Child Safety Conference; they aren't attending the follow-up conference regularly.

One of the greatest challenges is secondary trauma. Parent advocates re-surface some of the most painful events in their own lives every time they walk in the borough offices. We're always looking for ways to support them.

What keeps us going are small victories, like a parent who spoke limited English and was shy and withdrawn when she came into the conference, and with the help and support of the advocate she was able to open up and articulate her needs and concerns in a way that wouldn't have happened if she didn't have the advocate by her side.

## Q: Is there anything else you'd like parents to know about this program?

**A:** This initiative is living, breathing proof that parents and professionals working together can change the system for the better if we are focused on shared goals and aspirations. ■

# Partners in Planning

When parents and caseworkers work together, families move in the right direction

BY STAFF

*Toni Miner and Sherry Tomlinson, parent advocates in Jefferson County, Colorado and Columbus, Kansas, discuss how parents can work effectively with their caseworkers to get the services they want and need.*

## Q: What can parents do if their worker isn't helping them find services?

**Miner:** Workers are supposed to help parents gain whatever resources they need—not necessarily call all the programs, but at least get families going in the right direction. It's also a worker's responsibility to communicate when they're going to get back to parents. When they don't, parents don't know where they're going or what they're supposed to do.

But the reality is that most workers have more cases than they're supposed to. Workers have told me

they've had days when they had no time to eat.

When a worker says she'll get back to you, parents may need to give it a few days. Once you have, though, call again. You might want to say: "I realize that you're busy, but I need your help so that I know what I need to do."

If more time passes, and you're thinking of going to the supervisor, I encourage parents to talk to the worker again first, because chances are you're still going to have to deal with that worker after that call.

Even if you're just leaving a message, you might say something like: "I feel like I'm not getting the help that I need from you. I'm wondering if I need to go to your supervisor." That may make your caseworker mad. But it's better if you give your worker that warning. And if your worker is clearly not doing her job, the supervisor has to know.

At the same time, you can look for other people who can also help you. Sometimes your lawyer can help you find resources. If your agency has parent advocates or mentors, they can be a help to you.

**Tomlinson:** Sometimes workers don't know as much about services that work as parents who have been through them. If you feel like your caseworker isn't helping you find the services you need, try to find parents who have succeeded in reunifying their families and find out what they did. A Parents Anonymous group, or any parent support group, is a perfect start.

## Q: How can parents get sent to services that are actually helpful?

**Tomlinson:** I work with parents to develop their own plan for success. Normally, caseworkers go into

a case plan with an attitude of, "This is what we want you to do." Even if parents think there is no possible way they can complete the case plan, they automatically agree to do individual counseling and family counseling and treatment and visitations three times a week. The parent will say, "Oh yeah, I can do it." All that parent is thinking about is getting their child back.

But agreeing to a plan you can't complete or that you don't think will help may put your family in even greater jeopardy. Instead, parents need to think about what they believe will help their family and share that with their caseworker.

Sometimes as parents, we have a hard time asking for help. But parents need to be able to voice what they think will help them in order to better their families. ■

## Peer Support

*One of the biggest challenges for parents affected by child welfare involvement is planning. When you are in crisis, your mind can't focus on planning. That can make it even harder to keep track of the many mandates, appointments, visits and court dates that come with foster care.*

*Here are some suggestions from parents about how to make the service planning process more manageable.*

- **Ask as many questions as it takes to understand the status of your case and what your service plan is. It's your family's future and you have the right to ask questions of all parties involved in the case. If you are still confused, you can suggest a conference to talk things over.**
- **Get a calendar and write down all appointments, reviewing your calendar before you commit to anything. Call your caseworker regularly to make sure you're not forgetting anything and that you have the right information.**
- **Write out transportation and other expenses for your week so you can ask for assistance if needed.**
- **Write down all of the positive things and progress you've made throughout your case and bring them to the attention of your lawyer, caseworker and the judge.**
- **Accept help and services if you know your family needs it, and be proactive about addressing safety concerns. Ask for trauma-focused family therapy if your family has been through trauma.**
- **Take a parenting class of your choice. You might learn some helpful parenting tips.**
- **If you feel like your caseworker isn't helping you find the services you need, try to find parents who have succeeded in reunifying their families and find out what they did. You can also ask your caseworker, "Are there any parent support groups around?"**
- **Talk to your lawyer about your needs or things you don't understand.** ■

# Plan of My Own

I didn't think I needed services but I did them anyway

BY KEYNA FRANKLIN

**I WILL NEVER** forget the day I returned home from an appointment and saw a note on my door saying that my children had been removed from home.

I thought, "Did they take all of my kids?"

When I opened the door none of my six children were inside.

I immediately called the worker and found out that she had taken the two youngest, my 8-year-old son and my 4-year-old daughter, because they were home alone.

I was confused. When I left home that afternoon, my family was safe and happy.

My oldest sons, 15 and 10, and my 9-year-old daughter were at school. My oldest daughter, 14, was at home with the little ones because they were off from school.

## CASE IN THE MAKING

After I got off the phone, the other kids came home. I asked my daughter what happened, and she said she'd run to Target and didn't take the kids because it was freezing outside.

I was angry. I told her that she should have taken them.

At the time, I already had an open case with CPS involving her and my oldest son.

When I was 18 and they were 2 and 3, we lived with my mother, who had a drug problem. Their father's mother had told CPS that my house wasn't suitable for my kids. I didn't want to go to court so I agreed to let their father raise them.

I didn't see my kids again for 11 years.

Then one day, I bumped into them on the street. We reconnected and started visits. Two years later, they ran away from their father and came to live with me.

It was good having all my kids under the same roof and they were



Keyna and two of her children

happy being with each other.

But five months later CPS got involved because my son and daughter were always late to school. They continued to go to school near their father's house and it was a long commute. The school made a report and I was charged with educational neglect.

The worker had come that day to check up on them.

## COURT-ORDERED EMPTY NEST

The morning after they took my kids the worker got a court order to remove my other children. She took them later that night.

I cried like a baby.

## PLAN OF ACTION

Three days later, the worker told me that I had to do a parenting class and mental health counseling to get my kids back.

Mental health had nothing to do with my kids being removed but

she felt that I wasn't showing that I cared that they had been taken.

I told her, "I am here. That should show you that I want my kids back."

But then she told me that she was there to help me, and that made me feel better. She said she would help me find services, but that it would be good if I could find them on my own.

I didn't think I did anything wrong, but I knew I wasn't going to get my kids back without doing services. I immediately found a therapist and parenting class near where I lived.

I made my schedule to fit me.

I did my services in the mornings and visited the kids after school and on my days off from work.

My kids always wanted to know when they were coming home.

## FINDING MY VOICE

For the next several months I worked my service plan. I didn't get much from the parenting class because the counselor didn't have the answers to many of the questions

the parents had.

I resisted the counseling for the first two weeks because I was never one to share my feelings. I stayed quiet and waited for the time to go by. But then the therapist warned me that if I didn't talk he wouldn't be able to report any progress to the worker, they would think something was wrong with me and it would take longer to get my kids back.

I was mad. I didn't see what talking had to do with getting my kids back.

He said that if I didn't talk, CPS would think that my anger was building up, and when I eventually got mad, I would take it out on my kids.

That's when I opened up about how everyone was telling me that it was my fault that my kids got taken and how I thought my kids were mad at me.

It felt good to let it out.

## POWER IN PROGRESS

I finished my services in six months, but my case continued for another year because the CPS worker kept going to court and saying things like I didn't complete my services or that I didn't have food in my house for my kids.

Thankfully, I was able to show my certificates in court and photos proved that I had everything my kids needed at home. I felt powerful and in control.

Once the judge saw my progress, I quickly moved to weekend visits, overnights and then my kids came home.

It felt so good to have my family back under the same roof.

After my children came home, I volunteered at the foster care agency to help other parents who were in the same boat that I was in. When they would ask if I did my services and how it was, I would tell them it wasn't fair, but I did it to get my kids back. ■



# Breaking Down Barriers

Once I trusted my caseworker, I was able to make progress

BY JAMES SUMROW

**I MET MY** caseworker Gloria when I went to rehab after I got the case. The first time we met, she explained how she could help me get my kids back if I put forth the effort. It was hard to believe her because she worked for the same people who took the ones I loved. But she let me know that my children belonged with me, that she believed in me and that I could do this.

Finally, she asked me if there was anything that she could do for me.

My daughters Sheryl, 3, and Jayme, 2, had been taken into custody when they both tested positive for meth. I thought there was no way my kids could've tested positive because I would do it away from them, so I believed that New Mexico's Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) was doctoring the tests. (It wasn't until later that I found out what really happened to my girls. I had taken some dope to a guy that was staying in a motel room with my kids' mother. My girls got into the dope, ate it and got sick. Then the guy called CYFD.) But I thought the reason my kids were sick was just a stomach bug.

When my kids were taken, I became very defensive. I felt violated, like a part of me had been ripped away. I had a hard time trusting anyone and I wanted to blame my kids' mother, CYFD, law enforcement and especially the guy who called CYFD. My lack of trust made me very resistant to the help that they were trying to give. I also had been using meth for about 10 years and did not think that I could quit. But deep down I knew that I was to blame.

## HANDLED WITH CARE

I met Gloria a week before Christmas and about four weeks since I'd seen my kids. I told Gloria that I would love to see them.



James (in bunny costume) and his daughters

Before they were taken, they saw me just about every day. We had a very strong bond. Since we'd been separated, I'd wonder if they felt as bad I as did.

Gloria said they usually didn't take kids to rehab but she would see what she could do.

A few days later she called telling me that my kids and I would be having a two-hour visit.

I will never forget that Christmas. I was in rehab with some awesome people; they made drawings and toys out of paper for me to give to my kids.

When I had my visit, my girls came running and jumped on me, giving me hugs. I can remember Sheryl saying, "Dad, I want to go home." I didn't want them to know how bad I was feeling so I talked to them about how I was getting well.

Something else happened that day; Gloria showed me that I could trust her.

## TRUST LEADS TO PROGRESS

When I got out of rehab, I was able to change my attitude and work with people at CYFD constructively. I was willing to do the things on my treatment plan and was able to talk to the worker about all the stuff that I was doing and how I could do more to get the girls back. She made me feel like she was there to help. My daughters returned home to me after time.

It's important for a caseworker to get on the parents' good side, because it's so hard to trust the people who have taken your children. But when there's trust, parents are more receptive to hearing about behaviors that need to change.

Now when I tell my story to other parents, I always talk about how my caseworker was the one who helped me gain that trust. ■

# Rise

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