



MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Use Your Power to Choose

Interview with Digna Denis, parent advocate at Children’s Aid, by Rise’s Keyna Franklin

Parents have the right to choose their services. You don’t need to wait on that agency referral. You have to learn how to work the system, because the system will work you over like you don’t know what hit you.

In court or in doctor’s offices, look for flyers. In the agency, ask, ask, ask other parents. If you hear from other parents, “This was good,” go there. Find out if they take your insurance. Tell your caseworker about the service. Find out what documentation you will need to prove that you completed the service.

Try it out to see if you like it. But if you’re not comfortable, it won’t be productive. You won’t learn anything, and it’s going to tick you off. Then you’ll say the wrong thing to the wrong person, and once you’re labeled, forget it—you can come in a three-piece suit doing the rosary, but people are going to look for something you did wrong. Keep looking for the right place so you get the help you need.

When a service is high quality, you can feel the difference. Parents say, “That therapist really taught me how to deal with my child when she’s crying.” Parents are proud of themselves too. They tell me what they learned.

It can give you a sense of empowerment to take control. A lot of parents tell me, “They are not telling me everything I have to do. I’m doing something for myself. I’m trying to figure out how to solve this problem that I got myself into it.” That makes a big difference.



DIGNA AND HER SONS

Words to Help You Regain Balance

“I don’t mean to be rude but I don’t feel like you’re hearing what I’m saying.”

“I’m sorry, but underneath my anger is fear. I’m terrified. I’m worried I’ll never get my kids back. I’m worried they’ll get hurt when they’re away from me.”

“Can I tell you more about my skills and strengths so you can better understand me as a parent?”

If you start to lose your balance, ask for a time out: “This means a lot to me, and it’s getting really hard for me. Can we take 5 minutes so I can collect my thoughts and when I come back we can have the best possible conversation?”

Step outside, scream, talk to someone, take some deep breaths. Tell yourself, “I’m going to reset, get re-balanced. I’m not going to take the bait. My eyes are on the prize.”

Self-Advocacy Checklist

- ✓ Ask as many questions as it takes to understand your case and your service plan. It’s your family’s future. If you are still confused, ask for a conference.
- ✓ Ask if your agency or legal agency has a parent advocate or peer support group, and request that an advocate attend your case conferences if possible.
- ✓ Get a calendar and write down all appointments. Review your calendar before you commit to anything.
- ✓ Write out transportation and other expenses for your week so you can ask for assistance if needed, and see if you can find multiple services in one place.
- ✓ Call your caseworker regularly to make sure you’re not forgetting anything and that you have the right information.
- ✓ 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.
- ✓ Be proactive about addressing the agency’s safety concerns and accept help and services if you know your family needs it.

How to Negotiate

Interview with Daniel Ames, a Columbia Business School professor who specializes in negotiation, by Rise's Keyna Franklin

- 1 Be clear about your goals.** That advice might sound obvious but a lot of times people go into negotiation without being clear. Your goals might be the unity of your family and well-being of your child.
- 2 Write down your goal in a sentence or two and keep it in front of you.** That can become a guide to how you're acting or reacting. Things will happen to make us upset and draw off course from our goals. You can look at your goal and ask yourself, "Is the next thing I'm going to say going to bring me closer to my goal or put me at risk?"
- 3 Make sure you understand the process.** Ask in advance: "What's the purpose of this meeting? What comes next? What's after that?" This can help you be strategic and cope with setbacks. The short-term might be disappointing but you can say, "I'm going to put up with something I don't like for a few months to get me what I want."
- 4 Try to set aside emotion.** In child welfare, it can feel like, "I'm talking to someone who wants to destroy my family." That's terrifying. The stakes in these conversations are unbelievably high. When you view a negotiation as a battle, then the only way you win is that the other side loses. But many times, there's a way for both people to get something important. To be successful, you have to try to set aside emotion. "Be soft on the people and hard on the problem" is from the book *Getting to Yes*, and there's some wisdom in that. It can be helpful to say, "I'm not regarding you personally as the enemy. You and I can work together against this tough problem to find a solution that works for both of us."
- 5 Be ready for compromise.** Think about the possible agreement you could reach and ask yourself, "If I have to give up something, what would I give up? If I have to push hard for something, what would I push hard for?"
- 6 Practice.** Imagine the three toughest, most uncomfortable questions you could be asked and try to put the answers into words with someone you trust. Even if you just run through it 2-3 times, you'll be so much more ready.
- 7 Bring allies.** Having a team can help but it's really important to prepare. Tell them: "When you advocate for me, I want you to know this is the outcome that matters most to me. These are the things we're going to push for."
- 8 Beware of getting "goal-jacked."** That's when we let our goals get hijacked by emotion. When our buttons get pushed, we can lose sight of what really matters. It's not just in situations like child welfare that people blow up a deal or wreck a relationship because they don't keep in focus what they're trying to accomplish. The question is: Can you recognize it in the moment and remind yourself of your goal? If you wrote down your goal, you can say to yourself, "I'm looking at what I came here to achieve and that is the unification of my family. So every time I'm about to speak, I need to ask myself, 'Am I getting myself closer to that goal?'"



REBECCA WITH HER ADVOCATE, PEGGY GIBBS

My Words Had Power

BY REBECCA MOHAMMAD

In the beginning of my case, I did not like the treatment programs I was referred to. The first was dirty and disgusting. The second had a lot of active addicts and I couldn't see myself progressing there.

I felt like my caseworker would not hear that I really did need a different kind of program. I also knew that I was being too aggressive when I tried to talk to her and it was not coming across the right way.

Finally, I spoke to the parent advocate at my agency, who sent me to an all-women's program that was just what I needed.

It was a battle within a battle trying to hold on to my sanity while I opened up a Pandora's box and let everything out that I'd kept in for so long. When I thought about my past, I could not breathe. My therapist helped me be free with it. I was able to spit it all out, and cry and cry.

Still, my relationship with my worker did not improve. My advocate helped me start an investigation, and a new worker was put on my case. Within 10 months, my daughter returned home.

My parent advocate stepped in at the moments when I was stuck. What made the biggest difference was being believed. Unlike when I was a child, I could speak up, and my words finally had power.

Learn more about Rise's information to support parents and parent advocacy:

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