

SPRING 2021

Rise INSIGHTS

SOMEONE TO TURN TO

A VISION FOR CREATING NETWORKS OF PARENT
PEER CARE

INSIGHTS SHARES THE POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS OF PARENTS
IMPACTED BY THE FAMILY POLICING SYSTEM

ABOUT RISE

[Founded in 2005](#), based in NYC and led by parents impacted by the child welfare system, Rise believes that parents have the answers for their families and communities. Our mission is to support parents' leadership to dismantle the current child welfare system, eliminate cycles of harm, surveillance and punishment and create communities that invest in families and offer collective care, healing, and support.

Rise envisions communities that are free from injustice, family policing and separation and a society that is cultivating new ways of preventing and addressing harm. We imagine a radical commitment to ensuring that all families have what they need to live beyond survival and truly thrive.

Rise programs to inform, support and mobilize parents include:

Rise & Shine Parent Leadership Program: Through [this 18-week program](#), parents impacted by ACS build a strong foundation to become advocates and leaders in their community and in dismantling family policing.

Community Organizing: Our parent-led organizing team is [developing a Parents' Platform](#) to advocate for investments that will improve

community conditions, reduce family policing, and build new approaches to preventing and addressing harm.

Peer Care Network: The Peer Vision Team developed this report and model of peer and community care to support safe, thriving families and prevent involvement with the family policing system.

Parent Advocate Training: While holding an abolitionist strategy, Rise remains committed to one urgent adjustment—ensuring that parents involved in the system have the support of a trained, life-experienced parent advocate who can help them cope and reunify.

Publications: Through our [online magazine](#) and [publications](#), Rise shares stories by and for parents, provides information, raises awareness of the harms of the family policing system and highlights community-led solutions.

To learn more and get involved: [Sign up for our email newsletter](#), [visit our website](#) and watch our [vision webinar](#).

- We invite parents impacted by the family policing system to join Rise! [Sign up](#) to learn about opportunities to get involved and/or join our [community support circle](#).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper draws on the experiences, insights and vision of hundreds of parents impacted by the family policing system who have contributed to Rise over the years, and our ongoing learning from the work of visionaries, organizers and community leaders who have led the way in creating change through community-led peer support, mutual aid, restorative and transformative justice practices and the practice of abolition.

Our work on this model and report began with a meeting hosted by The Pinkerton Foundation two years ago to explore how the role of credible messengers had grown dramatically in New York City to support people impacted by the criminal legal system but not for parents impacted by the family regulation and policing system. Thank you to all from the Center for Family Representation, Children's Village, Community Connections for Youth, Good Shepherd, Graham, Heartshare and Rising Ground who joined that discussion, and to April Glad, senior program officer at Pinkerton, for launching us on this journey and for your ongoing support with this project.

Our vision work continued through a conversation with Diana Autin, executive director at SPAN, who generously shared information about SPAN's work that activated Rise to think more strategically about how a peer network could support parents and flourish outside of the system.

This report was developed collaboratively by the Rise Peer Vision Team: Careena Farmer, Norahsee Ortiz, Shakira Paige, and Tenisha Sanders, Contributors; Imani Worthy, Parent Leader; Keyna Franklin, Assistant Editor; Jeanette Vega, Assistant Director; Teresa Marrero, Training Coordinator; Tracy Serdjenian, Editorial Director. The report was authored by Tracy Serdjenian and edited by Nora McCarthy.

This report also reflects the work and input of all Rise staff, including: Ashanti Bryant, Program Assistant; Bianca Shaw, Assistant Director; Genevieve Saavedra Dalton Parker, Development Director; Halimah Washington, Community Coordinator; Imani Worthy, Parent Leader; Robbyne Wiley, Senior Parent Leader; and Teresa Bachiller, Rise & Shine Coordinator. We appreciate the contributions to the report made by Sara Werner, Contributor; Tyreena Anderson, Rise & Shine 2021; and members of the Rise Organizing Team: Melissa Landrau, Naashia B, Shamara Kelly and Yvonne Smith, Contributors; and all parents who contributed to this vision through Community Conversations.

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Special thanks to [Nat Chitwood](#), photographer, for the beautiful portraits in this report and to Jeff Faerber for report layout.



RISE PEER VISION TEAM (LEFT TO RIGHT): KEYNA FRANKLIN, SHAKIRA PAIGE, NORAHSEE ORTIZ, IMANI WORTHY, TERESA MARRERO, TENISHA SANDERS AND JEANETTE VEGA (CENTER).

"If families had everything they needed to thrive, there would be fewer investigations by the family policing system taking place in the Black and brown community. At Rise, we discussed what families need in their community and how we could support them with getting the things they need and want.

Peer and Community Supporters are people that will be trained on how to support parents with resources and guidance on how to advocate for themselves and their families. If parents had a person they could go to to get support and resources without any judgment, it would be better for families and communities."

—Keyna Franklin, Rise Peer Vision Team member and Assistant Editor

"Abolition in the bigger picture involves divesting from systems that create harm and investing those funds into community. The beauty of the peer support model is there is no system involvement. Our goal is to support families and communities to become powerful on their own and to support themselves—where the community members have the resources they need and are responsible for what goes on in their communities."

—Imani Worthy, Rise Peer Vision Team member and Parent Leader

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: SOMEONE TO TURN TO: A VISION FOR CREATING NETWORKS OF PARENT PEER CARE	5
THE PROBLEM: A CULTURE OF INVESTIGATIONS, NOT SUPPORT, HARMS FAMILIES	7
'I'm Here to Support'	9
Abolition Is Healing, Accountability and Safety—Without the Family Policing System	10
'Fear of CPS Impacts Every Move I Make'	11
How Peer and Community Support Reduces Isolation, Creates Opportunities to Heal and Builds Leadership Capacity	12
HOW IT CAN WORK: RISE'S VISION FOR PEER COLLECTIVE CARE	13
Organizations and Groups Interviewed	14
Building Community and Peer Support at Rise	15
Rise Reflections on SAMHSA's Core Values of Peer Support Practice	16
'When You Have Lived Experience, You Come with a Different Angle'	18
Types of Support We've Wanted or Needed	19
'Our First Priority Is Making Sure People Are OK'	20
Building a Vision for Organizing and Community Care.....	23
We Need a Childhood Protective Service	24
Community Resource Mapping	25
'Doing Activities Together Brings Us Closer and Helps Us Relax and Have Fun'	26
'Our Communities Are Resource Rich'	27
The Importance of Promoting the Positive	28
EVIDENCE: HOW PEER SUPPORT OFFERS SAFETY THAT ISN'T ABOUT PUNISHMENT	29
MAKING IT HAPPEN: HOW YOU CAN BE INVOLVED IN BUILDING NETWORKS OF PARENT PEER CARE	31
Further Reading	32
Building Safety in Community Through Restorative Justice	33

Why We're Using the Term "Family Policing System"

Throughout this paper, Rise will use the term “family policing system” instead of “child welfare system” because our team believes that it most accurately and directly describes the system’s purpose and impact. While Rise has often also used the term “family regulation system,” the Rise staff led by parents who have experienced the system considered this term “too soft” in describing the harmful role of the system in the lives of families it impacts. “Family policing” highlights the system’s connection to and similarities with the criminal legal system, and also explicitly links our work to broader movements to abolish policing.

Researcher, scholar and activist Dorothy Roberts explains, “The terms traditionally used to describe the system are all positive. ‘Child welfare system’ implies that the system’s purpose is to improve or protect the welfare of children. ‘Child protective services’ states that

they are services, and that these services are designed to protect children. ‘Foster care’ explicitly states that it is a form of care. In fact, this system is not about child or family welfare, protection or care. This system is about regulating, policing, punishing and destroying families.

“We’ve challenged terms that give a false impression of what the system does. Now, we are exploring different descriptions of it. To me, the most accurate term is ‘family policing system.’ Policing captures what this system does. It polices families with the threat of taking children away. Even when its agents don’t remove children, they can take children, and that threat is how they impose their power and terror. It is a form of punishment, harm and oppression. I’m not necessarily saying anybody should adopt one term or another, but it is important to challenge the false impression that terms for this system give—that it is about welfare, protection and care—because that is not what it does.”

*Excerpted and condensed from ‘Abolition Is the Only Answer’:
A Conversation with Dorothy Roberts
by Keyna Franklin, Assistant Editor*



INTRODUCTION

Someone to Turn To: A Vision for Creating Networks of Parent Peer Care

This paper presents Rise's vision for a peer network of collective care by and for parents. This fall, Rise created a parent Peer Vision Team to explore building a peer care model that can strengthen families while reducing contact with the family policing system.

Nationwide and in New York City, where Rise is based, it's crucial to broadly reorganize supports for families so that accessing resources and services does not put parents at risk of state intervention. Our society should [target community conditions, not families](#). This report shares a vision for one critical component of strong communities: networks of peer support and community care.

Parents often trust other parents from their community who can share information and provide support as peers—and evaluations of credible messenger and peer support models show that they are effective. Relationship-building that respects, values and supports families getting what they need without shame, blame and coercion can better support family safety.

REPLACE SYSTEM INTERVENTIONS

Within Rise, we've worked intentionally to strengthen peer relationships, combat isolation and create conditions for mutual trust and support. The peer support approaches that knit our Rise team together can be powerful tools for building community with parents beyond Rise. We also train and work with Parent Advocates who provide valued peer support to parents in the system. However, parents need that support without the trauma

of system involvement. Just as "credible messengers" and "violence interrupters" create safety without the violence, trauma and surveillance of police presence, parent peer support and advocacy can replace system interventions.

Our vision is that trained networks of peers with credible life experience will:

- Increase the likelihood that parents in emerging crises safely get support without state intervention;

- Increase the flourishing of peer relationships that reduce stress, trauma and isolation and strengthen healing, care, connectedness and joy.

Rise envisions that training hundreds of parents in impacted communities to intentionally build connections with their neighbors, offer emotional support, make connections to trusted

community resources and ultimately advocate to improve community resources can reduce family stress before it builds and lead to healthier, thriving families.

BUILD TRUST, LOVE AND JOY

Research shows that relationships help buffer the chronic stress families experience because of racism and poverty, and that highly networked communities are more able to make use of existing resources. Trained networks of peers with credible life experience can help to reduce the likelihood of contact with the family policing system, address barriers

to resources, and support and contribute to safe, strong families and communities.

Beyond training individuals, this approach can build the collective care capacity of entire communities. Throughout the pandemic, we've seen the responsiveness of mutual aid networks in addressing resource needs, and parents have turned to grassroots community groups for connection and support. This vision for peer support is consistent with that spirit of community and solidarity. Intentionally supporting relationships that

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A MODEL FOR NYC AND NATIONALLY

Peer support approaches are gaining strength nationwide, and we hope this peer model to prevent family policing will be implemented by communities throughout the country. Rise seeks to help launch it in New York City in partnership with other community-led organizations, beginning with communities most impacted by ACS (Administration for Children's Services).

The Peer Vision Team interviewed eight organizations doing relevant work and drew on what we've learned over the years at Rise to lay out the vision in this paper. We hope that the examples and vision highlighted in this report will be useful to allies in NYC and nationwide who are building and growing peer networks as a strategy to support families and prevent involvement with the family policing system and other punitive systems. ■

Peer Vision Team: Report Development Process

Rise created a parent-led workgroup to develop this report, composed almost entirely of parents impacted by the family policing system (eight out of nine members). The Peer Vision Team included Careena Farmer, Shakira Paige, Tenisha Sanders, Norahsee Ortiz, Imani Worthy, Keyna Franklin, Jeanette Vega, Teresa Marrero and Tracy Serdjenian.

During the eight months that our workgroup met to develop this vision, model and report, we regularly held discussions and reflected through writing about our own life experiences. We learned to [deepen our restorative justice practice](#) through training by B.R.E.A.T.H.E. and to understand this peer support vision as an abolitionist strategy through an [abolition retreat](#) led by Rise's Bianca Shaw and Genevieve Saavedra Dalton Parker. We intentionally sought to work together as a team, create a safe space and practice our listening and peer support skills. In doing so, we hoped to lay a foundation for how we can interact and build relationships and community when we launch the model here in NYC.

Research, interviews, reading, exploring community resources, and reviewing information shared by others doing similar work helped us build our vision. Most critical was conducting eight interviews with individuals working for organizations and groups that operate from a model of peer and community care—peer support, credible messenger mentoring, mutual aid and restorative justice circle practice. We learned about their methods, goals and impact; peer roles and responsibilities; funding sources; training and outreach, systems for tracking their work; and how they navigate mandated reporting, de-escalate crises, work with trauma and support one another.

The group also drew on what we know from our own lived

experiences and reflected on how our experiences could inform our vision for an effective peer support model. As Norahsee Ortiz noted, in this way, we were able to “create something positive (the peer and community care model) from something negative (our experiences with the family policing system).”



THE RISE PEER VISION TEAM



THE PROBLEM

A Culture of Investigations, Not Support, Harms Families

Rise's vision for a peer care model builds on two years of organizational focus on examining root causes and potential solutions for families impacted by family policing.

In many communities, child welfare investigations are omnipresent. Decades of public policy have resulted in over-investment in failing family policing system interventions and under-investment in the community infrastructure, design and resources that reduce stress on families and enable families to secure support in times of crisis.

Nationally [child abuse and neglect reports grew more than 12% in just 5 years, from 2013 to 2017](#), although the vast majority are not found credible. Abuse scandals and sensational media coverage of child fatalities have put mandated reporters under pressure to report any suspicion. Yet unnecessary investigations harm families. [This heightened surveillance has fallen disproportionately on poor parents of color](#), who come into greater contact with mandated reporters. Fear of family separation keeps parents from seeking assistance from doctors, school personnel and other mandated reporters, who increasingly make hotline reports rather than assisting families.

Often, families experience terrifying investigations only because of challenges tied to poverty, racism and social isolation. Wages and

Often, families experience terrifying investigations only because of challenges tied to poverty, racism and social isolation.

employment protections have dropped over the last 50 years while standards of parenting have shifted so that conditions of poverty are now considered neglect.

One NYC mother was recently investigated when she had her oldest child stay home from school to watch his little brother while she went to work. Another had her children's school report her for neglect when she ran out of money for laundry and rinsed her children's clothes in the bathtub without detergent.

Peer Vision Team member Shakira Paige recalled:

"I was in a shelter with three kids and was pregnant with the fourth. It was March 24, and I wasn't going to get food stamps until April 1. I was lucky my kids weren't in school—I would have had an ACS case because we didn't have food. I didn't tell anybody what was going on because I was scared to get an ACS case because I didn't have the necessities for my kids. We ate peanut butter for six days. Then, I ran out of Pampers just hours before 12 o'clock hit and I could go get some. My daughter learned how to use the bathroom at eight months.

"I was afraid the shelter was going to call ACS and say I was neglecting my kids. I kept the caseworker at the shelter out of our space until I was able to go food shopping. We'd go to the park all day and I'd wait for the caseworkers to leave before we returned to the shelter. It could have escalated. They finally came in while I was food shopping—they are able to come in whenever they want. I'm glad that while they were in there, I was bringing in the food because the caseworker said, 'I was going to call ACS because there was no food here.' I wasn't really aware of pantries at that time. If there was peer support or somebody I could trust that wasn't a mandated reporter, I would have asked for help."

Parents often feel that there is no one safe and knowledgeable to turn to during times of crisis, leaving families struggling in silence. Without an outlet to talk through challenges and access support and resources, minor issues that could be resolved or reduced often escalate.

Peer Vision Team member Keyna Franklin explained:

"If I had someone to babysit, I don't think I would have had an ACS case. ACS became involved when I left my younger kids with my 14-year-old child watching them when I went out for an appointment. I was not able to find peer support in my community because everyone stayed to themselves and didn't want to get involved in other people's issues. I knew people in my community but didn't feel comfortable enough to ask them for help."

SURVEILLANCE ISN'T SAFETY

Many of the resources that are available to low-income families are purposefully limited, difficult to access and entwined with family policing systems, adding stress to already challenging situations. Families can often be prioritized for basic needs like housing and childcare only through system involvement.

Underlying these public policies are racist and biased assumptions that poor people and people of color can't be trusted to care for their children and require monitoring. Rooted in histories of slavery and genocide, these racist tropes have been used throughout U.S. history to justify intentional withholding of every form of economic and civic opportunity in Black and Native American communities. Then they are used to justify punishment—including family and community separation through family policing and incarceration—when families can't meet their basic needs.

Small acts of community serve as a net for all families. Yet in communities historically and intentionally redlined, disenfranchised and locked out of equitable funding for

education, health, housing and community institutions like parks and libraries, interpersonal networks have been weakened while conditions exacerbate family stress. As a result, many parents lack peer connections—a neighbor who could watch a sick child or offer use of a washer and dryer.

As Peer Vision Team member Imani Worthy described:

"I have needed diapers, a crib, and also someone to talk to—especially after my child was born and I experienced postpartum depression. My son was diagnosed with failure to thrive. He wouldn't eat. It would have been great to have someone there for input especially since my mother isn't here to guide me. Eventually my son became weak and we were accused of neglecting him, even though he was going

to the doctor. I can imagine that if I had support, that probably could have been avoided. The biggest barrier is being a poor Black woman with a child. There aren't many protections against racism, but having peer support helps you not feel alone."



IMANI WORTHY

The family policing system's impact is intergenerational, and parents with childhood histories in the foster system often face increased isolation, surveillance and risk of having their own children removed. Additionally, the shame and stigma surrounding ACS involvement often deepens isolation for parents experiencing investigations or separated from their children.

SUPPORT LINKED TO 'THREATENING INSTITUTIONS'

Research shows that providing families with the resources needed to care for their children prevents child maltreatment. In particular, research on the impact of the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#), [childcare subsidies](#), [housing](#) and other supports shows that effective solutions aren't about "fixing" parents' behavior,

Reasons We Wouldn't Access Support

- Judgment
- Having to go pick resources up (being judged)
- Don't want things "on the record"
- Asking too many questions about your household and why you are there, asking for birth certificates
- Making you come back another time
- Mandated reporters—they might call ACS, which could cause more harm than good

- Help only available certain days/times
- Specific requirements: Only for children with specific behavior "problems"; need insurance to be able to access it, need certain ID, proof of address; have to become part of the church
- Don't know what is available
- Fear of ICE
- Impact of having been incarcerated—should not be asked about this, it is used against people
- Not having someone to go to with issues or complaints when things are mishandled
- Telling you how you should have handled things after the fact

yet these investments aren't typically considered prevention services. Meanwhile, as [researcher Kelley Fong documented](#):

"CPS (Child Protective Services) doesn't like to think of itself as a threatening institution, but they are experienced that way by mothers. When we link supports to this threatening institution that can remove your children, families who are struggling with homelessness, housing or food insecurity, or domestic violence may not share that information with service providers. It sometimes cuts them off from support."

Housing was the most common challenge that parents mentioned in Fong's research. Mothers talked about not wanting to go to shelters because they feared that shelter staff would call CPS. Clearly, survival for low-income parents of color requires expertise in navigating resources and building a personal community care network.

NURTURE THE ROOTS

In recent years, cities and states have recognized the emotional and financial costs of over-surveillance. Child welfare investigations are invasive, frightening and also wasteful; nationally, 80% of allegations are deemed "unfounded." School personnel, the biggest reporters, are wrong about families 90%

of the time. To stem investigations and better assist families, multiple states created family enrichment centers—but these centers are funded by the family policing system and even run by foster system provider agencies.

To be clear, services administered by the family policing system are, by design, not what parents want. Seeking to rebrand or build trust with CPS is not worthwhile. Parents do not want their information potentially accessible to CPS. They do not want funding to flow from an agency with the power to separate their family. They do not want organizations steeped in dynamics of threat, coercion, monitoring and control to be involved in their family lives.

Parents want investment in trusted organizations and institutions with a track record of responsive care in their communities. They want investment in what already works, so it can grow.

Too often, community-led organizations that operate with real trust and strong networks struggle for opportunities to expand what they do well, while social service agencies with high frontline turnover and weak roots have the political capital to garner significant investment. Peer care networks should be nurtured where caring, healing relationships are already growing. ■

PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

'I'm Here to Support'

BY SHAKIRA PAIGE

"Peer and Community Supporters can build relationships with families by being open and honest and by having kids themselves, so that they understand the parent and what they go through. It's very important that advocates have lived experience with the family policing system or be a parent—because otherwise, how can you tell parents anything? It is important that Peer and Community Supporters never judge parents, just like if it was you in that same situation.

"Part of keeping families safe is knowing what's going on with them and letting them know, 'I'm here to support you, not to harm you and your family.' Peer and Community Supporters can prevent family policing involvement if the situation is a simple issue of no food, or no clean clothes or toys, or if the parent needs to learn different methods of disciplining their children and responding to behavioral challenges.



"Peer Supporters can provide information to parents and let them know where they can go for help—if they need clothes washed to keep the kids clean or food in the apartment. Community Supporters could hold community meetings about poverty to see where we are all struggling and what we can do about it together.

"I know it's going to be hard to abolish the system, but as a person that went through the system, abolition means more to

me—closing the family policing system, the cops and anything else that is bad for the communities I live in. Child welfare and police don't respect us. Racism, classism and sexism all stand hand-in-hand. As a contributor at Rise, I'm ready for the long run—to make the community a better place.

"I envision parents getting more funds beyond welfare, better jobs, better community spaces and places for food shopping. When people are falling into homelessness, instead of sending them to a shelter, we should help them to be comfortable in the longer term by providing 6 months to a year of paid rent. We need banks that provide ways to

build our credit without payments or fees. There's a lot I want to see done. To reach our North Star, we must never hold back—we must keep moving and pushing forward."

SHAKIRA PAIGE

INTERVIEW: DOROTHY ROBERTS

Abolition Is Healing, Accountability and Safety—Without the Family Policing System

An interview with Dorothy Roberts, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a researcher, scholar and activist.

From the prison abolition movement, we've learned that it is ineffective and wrong to deal with violence with more violence. The prison system inflicts harm not only on people who commit offenses that put them in prison, but on entire communities, including people they have harmed. This is true of the family policing system as well. Most children are put in the system because of material needs caused by structural inequalities, which the system doesn't address and makes worse. The current system hasn't prevented harm or violence in families or communities, and in fact inflicts harm. We need to work on better and more loving, caring and compassionate ways of addressing harm.

We can learn a lot from anti-carceral feminists and others in the prison abolition movement who have been working to address harm in communities and families in ways that don't involve calling the police, putting people in cages, taking children away or destroying families. People have been working on transformative justice—not just restorative justice that is part of the current system, but transformative



DOROTHY ROBERTS

approaches that are disconnected from policing. These approaches hold people who inflict harm accountable without dehumanizing or punishing them. They work toward healing families and stopping harm from occurring again.

We have evidence and faith that transforming the way that society addresses people's needs will reduce harm. To think, "This is the awful situation we are in today and therefore we need to keep this system" ignores the fact that, as we work toward a different world, we won't be in this awful situation. As we work toward abolition, we will begin to reduce the harms that occur today and continue to prevent more harms in the future.

It doesn't make sense to keep an oppressive system because we are unwilling to imagine something better. Let's imagine something better, work toward it and get rid of what we know is oppressive. Some people are unwilling to imagine something different because they have a stake in the current system. Some people simply have a failure of imagination, and it helps to give them a vision to work toward.

I see my work as helping to build a vision so more people realize this is an oppressive, violent, racist system and join the movement to organize against it. I think there are lots of people, especially people who have been harmed by the family policing system, who are ready to lead and join a movement to abolish it. I firmly believe that if we are willing to envision and work toward a better, more humane, caring and compassionate world, we can achieve it.

*Excerpted from 'Abolition Is the Only Answer':
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by Keyna Franklin, Assistant Editor*

Terms We're Using

ABOLITION OF THE FAMILY POLICING SYSTEM

[Rise asked Dorothy Roberts what child welfare system abolition means to her.](#) She explained:

"Abolition means completely dismantling this system of family policing—not reforming it or replacing the current system with a new and improved system. It means ending its philosophy, design, practices and policies and building a different way of caring for families. Ending the system doesn't mean leaving people to fend for themselves in a society that is structured unequally. We are talking about transforming society, including making structural changes at a societal level and changes in our communities. Ending structural racism is a tall order, but we need to work toward that. We need to care for families by

providing housing and food, as well as universal, equal and free health care and education. At a community level, we need to care for each other without relying on violent systems like police, prisons, and child removal. It involves mutual aid and figuring out how to deal with families' problems and needs and the conflict and violence that occurs in families, in ways that are not punitive, inhumane, violent and terroristic."

LEARN MORE

- Rise: [Abolition Resources Learning List](#)
- Critical Resistance: [What Is the Prison Industrial Complex?](#)
- What Is Abolition?
- Community Justice for Youth Institute: [What Is Restorative Justice?](#)
- Restorative Justice Initiative NYC: [What Is Restorative Justice?](#)

PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

'Fear of CPS Impacts Every Move I Make'

BY ANONYMOUS

Being scared of the child welfare system has an impact on almost everything I do. Every move I make has to be given careful thought—what doctors I go to and what I tell a doctor or therapist.

I can't talk openly with doctors about my pain or tell them about my memory issues because it could look bad for me as a parent. When I talk about pain, they automatically think I'm trying to get narcotics, which I'm not. I'm sleepy enough without them.

I was in pain a long time before I finally received a diagnosis for a medical condition. Before I was diagnosed, I went a few times to the same neurologist. After the tests came back negative, he suggested that seeing a psychiatrist would probably be more helpful. I felt really badly because I had serious pain and I wasn't being listened to. He insisted it was all in my head. I also felt that this doctor could have done other testing, which he refused to do. I had to live with pain, which made it harder to care for my child.

Finally I did get a diagnosis for the pain.

'YOU'RE NEVER TRULY SAFE'

Still, I'm scared that if I go to the hospital for medical issues, that I might be held against my will. Although I have not been in psych hospitals in at least 8 years, my past issues get mentioned any time I seek help at any hospital. I feel embarrassed that my psych issues are brought up even when that is not the reason I went to the hospital.

There is this one hospital in the Bronx that is the worst. One time I went there after I had a seizure and they tried to hold me against my will because I had once been there for psych issues. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to go home to my child.

Also, a therapist who I was mandated to see once told me that, no matter what, I would never be truly safe from the child welfare system. Because I have mental health issues, my son

could be taken back by CPS at any time, for any reason.

HOW DO I GET HELP?

I also have memory issues. I'm scared because I'm way too young to have memory issues. This means I have to work harder and use strategies like writing things down and setting alarms so I won't forget things.

It would be helpful if I could talk about my memory issues, my pain and my medications (which make me tired), but I'm afraid if I share these struggles with doctors, CPS will take my baby when I've worked so hard to get him back from foster care.

Since high school, I've also been forced to see therapists I didn't want to go to, and sometimes I refused to talk to them. Because of these experiences, I'm not comfortable with doctors or therapists and don't trust them. How do I get help?

It would be helpful to get therapy for my son. He doesn't listen to me. I wonder, "Am I too soft with him?" There aren't any parenting classes that I want to take right now. If I were to take a class, I would want to do it together with my son, and they only offer that kind of class for babies and toddlers.

IF SOMEBODY COULD JUST LISTEN

My son and I used to go to Mommy and Me classes for mothers and kids aged 3 and under. We sat on cushions on the floor and did activities together and played with all kinds of toys and games. We did group activities such as making a city together out of blocks without the kids knocking the blocks down. We told them they could knock everything down as soon as we finished. We listened to music and did art.

This was so much fun that I signed up voluntarily three times in a row. I love to see my son happy and playing with friends, and it was helpful to be around other moms and get suggestions and advice about kids.

I wish I had someone to talk to who would keep everything confidential. If I could tell everything I need to say without fear that it would make my life difficult, if somebody could just listen, if I could talk without worry about consequences, I would feel safe. I would talk about my pain issues, my weight issues and my parenting issues. Sometimes, I don't need advice and suggestions—I just want to talk. Just talking and getting rid of your worries feels better.

Terms We're Using

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

[Amplify RJ](#) defines [restorative justice](#) as "a philosophy and set of practices, rooted in Indigenous teachings, that emphasize our interconnection by repairing relationships when harm occurs while proactively building and maintaining relationships to prevent future harm."

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

[TransformHarm.org](#) shares the following descriptions of transformative justice:

- According to [Philly Stands Up!](#), *Transformative Justice is a way of practicing alternative justice that acknowledges individual experiences and identities and works to actively resist the state's criminal injustice system. Transformative Justice recognizes that oppression is at the root of all forms of harm, abuse and assault. As a practice, it therefore aims to address and confront those oppressions on all levels and treats this concept as an integral part to accountability and healing.*
- From [Generation 5](#): *Transformative justice [is] a liberatory approach to violence... [which] seeks safety and accountability without relying on alienation, punishment, or State or systemic violence, including incarceration or policing.*

How Peer and Community Support Reduces Isolation, Creates Opportunities to Heal and Builds Leadership Capacity

“I’m a peer offering community and hope. I have full confidence in every mom, no matter their situation. People say to me, ‘You should become a counselor.’ But, I don’t want to be a professional—I want to be a peer. I can say, ‘I’m just like you. I’ve felt and gone through the same things.’ All of our facilitators are in recovery and had some interaction with DSS (Department of Social Services)—most had a child removed. That’s key to building rapport. We say, ‘You’re going to meet moms going through the same thing you are, so that you do not feel alone.’ When a new mom comes in, the group surrounds her, loves her and shares tips. We need community around us forever.”

—Dena Garzone, Peer Support Specialist, Moms Matter

“A credible messenger is somebody with lived experience who, based upon that lived experience, wants to help to positively change somebody else’s experience. You take responsibility and accountability for being part of a community and sharing your experience with the intention to bring about positivity in the community. The goal is also for people to be able to heal—as someone heals, that person then begins to heal their family, and families healing one at a time help to heal our community.”

—Keyonn Sheppard, Youth Program Facilitator, Institute of Transformative Mentoring

“One of the biggest things we hear from parents about the importance of peer support is the feeling of being connected to a large family—and that sense of community and nonjudgmental support among the whole family. It’s not just that you’re a parent, getting services as a parent, but you’re bringing your kids, your grandma and grandpa and even the family dog. A lot of parents say that when they met CCFY shortly after their child got involved in the juvenile justice system, they felt very hopeless. They felt a big sense of isolation, being judged, or that shame of having a kid in the system and feeling like that’s going to make me look like a bad parent. By coming together with other parents, they realize we’re not bad parents and we don’t need to be ashamed. There’s solidarity and community in coming together.”

—Rubén Austria, Executive Director, Community Connections for Youth (CCFY)

“We don’t believe in just one model of support or one model of leadership development, because people are so different and are in different places in their journey and experience. We have an array of leadership development programs. At the heart of all of them is building the capacity of parents to advocate on their own and to become leaders. The vast majority of our staff are people who first came to SPAN for support, then became a peer support volunteer and then became a staff person—because we go to our peer support volunteers when we’re hiring.

Our peer support staff are called family resource specialists. Their job requires them to provide information and support to families that they’re connected with, including information and support to help parents speak on their own behalf; work with professionals in different systems to be more understanding of and able to work more effectively with families; develop relationships and connections with community-based organizations and service providers to expand the list of resources and supports available to families; and write up what they learn and use it to engage in public policy advocacy to help change systems.”

—Diana Autin, Executive Director, SPAN



HOW IT CAN WORK

Rise's Vision for Peer Collective Care

Parents in neighborhoods heavily impacted by family policing can be better served by a supportive peer community to turn to when under stress. Parents themselves say that what they need to prevent and cope with family crises is peer support. Parents often trust other parents from their community who have been impacted by systems themselves, know how to get things done and can share information and provide support as peers.

Rise envisions two peer care roles that will work together to sustain networks of collective care, healing and support in communities:

Peer Supporters: Peer Supporters are conceived of as parents impacted by the family policing system who are trained as volunteers to provide basic support to other parents who are facing family challenges, concerned about ACS involvement or dealing with ACS, or just seeking opportunities to enhance their family lives. Their primary responsibility will be to serve as safe, nonjudgmental people to talk to who have the community knowledge to make useful connections.

They will be trained to:

- Understand principles of peer support and mutual aid, trauma and stress impacts, active listening skills, crisis de-escalation, boundaries and self-care;
- Develop information and resource guides to their communities through research and by visiting community organizations and asking neighbors about resources, including informal assistance and formal but safe resources, such as early legal representation;

A core tenet of peer support is that the person receiving support this time can provide support to someone else next time.

- Support one another through twice-monthly restorative justice peacekeeping circles and a buddy system;
- Connect with parents in their community by introducing themselves as Peer Supporters in community spaces, religious organizations, school PTAs, etc. and sharing flyers about how they can assist families;
- Use a resource-sharing listserv or text chat and resource guides to identify resources and opportunities that may be of interest to parents in their community.

Community Supporters: Community Supporters will have all the training, resources and support of Peer Supporters and will:

- Work within or on-site at community organizations trusted by parents;
- Walk families through challenges, such as spending time going with a parent to appointments or helping make a plan to navigate systems;
- Hold restorative justice circles to build relationships

and support for parents and Peer Supporters in their community;

- Follow up on introductions and connections to parents made by Peer Supporters and mandated reporters.

Peer and Community Supporters will not act as mandated reporters and will have relevant credible life experiences.

TRAINING FOR POWER AND POSSIBILITY

Peer care supporters will be trained in the philosophy and values of peer support. Peer support is not just a matter of hiring parents into social work or case management-type roles. Peer support has a philosophy and

values that make it fundamentally different from system intervention. Similar to mutual aid, a core tenet of peer support is that the person receiving support this time can provide support to someone else next time. Peer support recognizes that a crisis is temporary, and that setbacks can lead to growth and knowledge that can be shared. The approach does not take away from but rather contributes to family and community self-determination and power.

For Juan PaPo Santiago, program coordinator for the Community Navigator Program in East Harlem, peer modeling is a key to transferring power:

"If people see somebody like themselves making those moves, they're more likely to make those moves themselves. We're not trying to build reliance on the Navigators. People end up building a capacity within themselves to go out and do the research and put in the legwork. We are showing them that it's possible. That's what a lot of folks need, to know that it is even possible for this to happen. A familiar face helps with that."

SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) has developed [ethical guidelines](#), [practice standards](#)

Organizations and Groups Interviewed

This report draws on Rise's interviews with the following organizations and groups:

THE B.R.E.A.T.H.E. COLLECTIVE

[B.R.E.A.T.H.E. \(Balanced, Restored, Empowered, Affirmed, Transformed, Healed, Embodied\)](#) is a collective of Black and brown womyn and girls committed to developing sacred connections and curating sacred space that allow us to BREATHE. Through the use of our experiences with restorative principles, peacemaking circles, mentorship and food as a healing praxis, we co-create pathways for people, especially our sistas, to experience a liberating revolutionary love and healing rooted in community.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS FOR YOUTH (CCFY)

[CCFY](#)'s mission is to equip grassroots faith and neighborhood organizations to develop effective community driven alternatives to incarceration for youth. CCFY directly serves youth and families in the South Bronx and provides leadership to similar efforts across the country through training and technical assistance.

COMMUNITY NAVIGATOR PROGRAM

[In partnership with Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College and the Institute for State and Local Government](#), the Manhattan District Attorney's Office invested in this program to recruit and train Community Navigators who focus on working in East Harlem with youth (ages 14 to 21) who are at risk of becoming involved in the justice system, and with people affected by domestic violence.

EAST BROOKLYN MUTUAL AID

[East Brooklyn Mutual Aid](#) delivers free groceries to their neighbors in Ocean Hill, Brownsville, East New York, Cypress Hill, Starrett City, Weeksville and Canarsie. They work with Brooklyn Packers and other distribution partners to buy, pack and deliver groceries as efficiently as possible. They now provide groceries for roughly 200 households per week, and since March 2020, they've made over 5,000 deliveries.

INSTITUTE FOR TRANSFORMATIVE MENTORING

[The Institute for Transformative Mentoring \(ITM\)](#) is a dynamic training program focused on the development of credible messengers (formerly incarcerated men and women) working in the social services fields throughout New York City. These mentors help young people navigate community violence and avoid the criminal justice system. Credible messengers are gaining systems-level recognition in New York City as an effective strategy to reduce crime and criminal justice involvement.

MOMS MATTER®, FOSTERING GREAT IDEAS®

Having a child removed and placed in foster care is a devastating and traumatic loss for parents—one that often leaves a lifelong impact on each family member. While children often desire to go back home, each parent is given a court-ordered treatment plan to complete before reunification can take place. [Moms Matter®](#) meets moms in their pain, through a peer to peer approach, providing training and support. [Moms Matter®](#) helps moms cope with their loss, build essential life skills, and break down their treatment plan goals into small and manageable tasks.

PEER NETWORK OF NEW YORK (PNNY)

[PNNY](#) started in 2010 as a pilot project with NYC's Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Use Prevention, Care and Treatment and the [National Harm Reduction Coalition](#). The project conducts community outreach and recruitment with other Peers working in harm reduction, syringe access programs and naloxone distribution. PNNY has been working the longest in the South Bronx and East Harlem and organizes with Peers in NYC's five boroughs and across the state. PNNY supports the work of Peers across New York State through education and training, leadership development and advocacy.

SPAN PARENT ADVOCACY NETWORK

[SPAN](#) was founded in 1987, in New Jersey, by parents of children with special needs. Located in Newark, SPAN empowers families as advocates and partners in improving education, health, and mental health outcomes for infants, toddlers, children and youth. SPAN's vision is that all families will have the resources and support they need to ensure that their children become fully participating and contributing members of our communities and society.

[and core values for peer support practice](#). Rise's Peer Vision Team found the principles applied to our vision for peer support, even though they were created specifically for those overcoming mental health and substance addiction challenges. Those values included that peer support is voluntary and is about equally shared power. It's also mutual, reciprocal and driven by the person receiving support.

RESOURCE CONNECTIONS

Resource guides developed by parents themselves that are informed and updated continuously through the practice of peer care will ensure that connections made by supporters are impactful.

Resource guides will include:

- Child welfare-related legal support, such as agencies that offer early legal representation during an investigation and information about parents' rights; information about what can lead to ACS involvement; what constitutes child abuse and neglect; and parents' legal rights during an investigation;
- Services and supports related to domestic violence; sexual abuse, assault and violence; and drug use and addiction, and options for children's care if a parent needs intensive services;
- Connections to housing attorneys and anti-eviction support;
- Educational support services including help with IEPs (individual education programs), educational testing, tutoring, legal representation in school conflicts and behavioral health supports;
- Organizations that can provide respite, crisis response and support with safety planning, like parental stress hotlines;
- Where to go for material resources such as food, clothing and diapers;
- Information and resources for LGBTQ children and youth and parents of LGBTQ children and youth;
- Resources and spaces offering emotional support, therapy, trauma



TERESA MARRERO, TRAINING COORDINATOR, RISE

treatment, grief support, and mediation and support around family challenges and conflicts;

- Self- and community-care opportunities, yoga, meditation, reiki and other healing practices;
- Arts, sports, camps and community programming for kids and families;
- Fun and affordable activities for families (e.g., \$5 movies, free days at museums);
- Information about individuals in a neighborhood within the Peer Care Network who might be able to offer small favors, like babysitting;

(continued on page 17)

Building Community and Peer Support at Rise

In addition to learning from others experienced with peer work to inform this model, Rise looked to what we already know and do. Peer support has been an important part of Rise going all the way back to our first writing group over 15 years ago. Our own history, processes and experiences inform our vision.

Rise works intentionally to strengthen peer relationships and networks of support and care:

■ All Rise staff are trained in restorative justice circle keeping by [B.R.E.A.T.H.E.](#) This training strengthens our relationships with one another and our knowledge and skills for using restorative justice practices and principles throughout all of our work. We use these tools to center relationships in all of our work and to address conflict and challenges as they emerge.

■ We develop [community agreements](#) in all of our programs to create a shared understanding of how we show up in our spaces together, what we need and how we can support each other in living our values and being at our best collectively.

■ In the [Rise & Shine Parent Leadership Program](#), we've created

a Buddy System, pairing parents who partner in community-building processes early on in the program, check in on each other and provide encouragement and support to their Buddy throughout the program. We learned this approach from the [Audre Lorde Project](#).

■ We created a WhatsApp group for parents in the Rise & Shine program to share news, updates and information, celebrate joys, offer encouragement and simply connect.

■ Rise offers a weekly [support circle](#) led by experienced Parent Advocates throughout the city—by and for parents impacted by the family policing system.

■ We engage in informal resource exchange and community building—sharing meals, bringing an extra coat to the office, celebrating holidays and birthdays, supporting each other around loss of family members (e.g., sending care packages), sharing information about housing and resources, and encouraging self-care.

VALUES

Rise Reflections on SAMHSA's Core Values of Peer Support Practice

Here, Keyna Franklin, Shakira Paige, Norahsee Ortiz and Imani Worthy of the Rise Peer Vision Team reflect on [SAMHSA's 12 core principles of peer support](#).

1. PEER SUPPORT IS VOLUNTARY.

"ACS tries to force people to take services you don't need, that have nothing to do with what you need. Don't force something on people. We should be able to choose."

2. PEER SUPPORTERS ARE HOPEFUL.

"You have a shoulder to lean on. That's where we are going. We want the community to be hopeful. We live in a community where people are scared. Having an ACS case is traumatic. We want to make a better future for our children and our community."

3. PEER SUPPORTS ARE OPEN MINDED.

"Some families may have a background different from yours—this doesn't mean that what they believe is wrong. Keeping an open mind is a form of respect. It's important to try to see things from many angles, to not be judgmental and to not give up on someone just because their beliefs don't mirror yours."

4. PEER SUPPORTERS ARE EMPATHETIC.

"You connect more with people when you can put yourself in their shoes. Sympathy is pity, and I don't think many people like to feel pitied. Anyone can feel sympathetic, but not too many people practice empathy. Being able to connect to someone else's energy—even if your low isn't the same as someone else's, you can say, 'I've been low, too.' It is easy to feel like you're alone, when you're not."

5. PEER SUPPORTERS ARE RESPECTFUL.

"If you don't have patience, kindness, warmth and dignity, people don't want to talk to you. You want to be welcoming and kind. You have to respect the family. You never tell the family what they need. If you respect what the family says their needs are, they will respect you as their peer support."

6. PEER SUPPORTERS FACILITATE CHANGE.

"As Peer Supporters, we want to correct injustice and make change for people by listening without blame or judgment. We can explore the support they want and need. Having somebody in your corner means a lot to people—when they know you went through the same struggle, dealing with the injustice of the family policing system and a biased world. It is a challenge to overcome injustice. Many of us went through hell and are dealing with that still with the SCR limiting our work options.

We're ready to show the community that they can trust us. We can offer a listening ear and point people in the best possible direction to facilitate change."

7. PEER SUPPORTERS ARE HONEST AND DIRECT.

"To keep people grounded, to gain respect and trust, it's important to be honest and direct with people. It shows that you care not just about making others feel good. Even if they don't like what you have to say, honesty shows character. Being direct and to the point is also considerate of others' time. Never tell someone you can do something if you can't, because you want them to trust you and what you say."

8. PEER SUPPORT IS MUTUAL AND RECIPROCAL.

"Each person has things to teach and learn. You can share back and forth. We can both share powerful things that hold value. It is about community."

9. PEER SUPPORT IS EQUALLY SHARED POWER.

"Foster care workers say, 'If you don't do what I say, I'm not going to help you get your kids back.' It is an abuse of power when we are talking about *my* family, *my* needs. As a Peer Supporter, if you have resources and information, you shouldn't use it against someone. We are trying to share power. I'm not going to say, 'Unless you do what I'm telling you, I'm not going to support you.' I'm not telling you what to do and how to do it, but I am going to share what I've learned from my experience."

10. PEER SUPPORT IS STRENGTHS-FOCUSED.

"Life is great at pointing out our faults. There's always something I want to fix or better about myself, and in the midst of that I don't even nurture or congratulate my strengths. Being strengths-focused builds confidence and self-esteem. It gives people the opportunity to nurture and pay attention to what they are naturally good at—ultimately creating a better version of themselves, not turning them into someone else."

11. PEER SUPPORT IS TRANSPARENT.

"We have to set boundaries. If we don't, people will ask for stuff we can't provide. We're not your doctor, attorney or judge. We're here to support you and give resources. We're not here to say, 'You're going through depression,' but to say, 'Do you want to talk to someone about how you are feeling?'"

12. PEER SUPPORT IS PERSON-DRIVEN.

"To motivate is different than telling someone what to do and how to do it. This is listening, helping someone to navigate as their own person and to motivate them in that direction. It's saying, 'This is something you can take advantage of that you might be interested in.'"

(continued from page 15)

- Information about opportunities to get involved in legislative advocacy and community organizing, and also to build their knowledge and skills, like bystander intervention training.

While NYC is so resource rich that it will be impossible to create comprehensive, up-to-date community guides, supporters will use the text chat to share information and will use a database to track families' needs and peers' success in making meaningful connections.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE CIRCLES

In NYC, we envision restorative justice (RJ) circles will be held twice monthly, providing a peer-facilitated safe and healing space open to Peer and Community Supporters as well as parents working with them so they connect, build relationships, share resources and provide each other with care and support.

While restorative justice is a strategy for responding to harm and healing relationships, as RJ trainer Ashley Ellis, founder of B.R.E.A.T.H.E. Circles, explains, regularly engaging in restorative justice circles is also a proactive strategy to build deep community relationships:

Through circles we seek to “create spaces where folks feel safe and connected, can tap out of hard places and into that space, and feel safe to show up and ask for help, get mutual aid and the things they need to push our community forward. The hope is that everybody feels seen, valued and heard and has an opportunity to thrive—and then, they can create that for somebody else. Now you have whole communities together in relationship with people who see, hear and value them. With that, there's no reason for me to create harm or engage in violence because I value my neighbor, my community, myself, my relationships. If harm does happen, I am so connected that I don't feel ashamed about taking accountability and responsibility. I want to do what I need to do to make sure that is right.”

HOW THE PEER CARE NETWORK WILL WORK: MEETING PARENTS IN COMMUNITY

Peer and Community Supporters will support parents by announcing their role in community spaces, connecting with individual parents, meeting one-on-one to listen and share resources, inviting parents to circle, going with parents to navigate systems and services, and offering a welcome space in a community organization where parents can drop by for conversation, a cup of coffee, a “give and take” closet with supplies like baby clothes and diapers and a community fridge.

([The Safety Net Project](#) in NYC and [SPAN](#) in NJ, which provide on-site support within partner community organizations, are models for this approach.)

Peer Supporters will be connected to Community Supporters in their neighborhood, so they can introduce parents looking for a deeper level of support. When mandated reporters are aware that a family needs resources, they can connect the family with a peer. This can help interrupt the pipeline of hotline reports and investigations.

PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND INFORMATION

Parents most want peers to be available for emotional support—to have someone to talk to who understands, lives in their community, looks like them and has experienced the family policing system.

In our conversations at Rise, parents also expressed the need for information, including information about how to avoid state intervention. They want information about respite, daycare and childcare for children of all ages, and opportunities for kids to take arts and sports programs, go on trips and attend camps. They want to know where to access food and diapers without being required to present documentation. They especially want to know where to find these things in their communities without getting resources through a CPS case or ACS-affiliated program.

East Harlem Community Navigator Shonique Hill says:

“A lot of people from East Harlem are very private. It's not just about lack of resources. Some people are scared to go to these resources and be open and say, ‘This is what I need.’ I'm from East Harlem. I approach everything I do as a Navigator as if I'm speaking to myself as a resident. If we can get the mom or youth a job or back in school, it brings positivity back into that household and pushes everyone forward. If everybody in East Harlem gets what they need, the neighborhood will grow and be much more positive.”

Common barriers parents experience in accessing resources and support for their families include judgment; being required to answer invasive questions, show documentation and have information “on record”; fear of mandated reporters and punitive systems (e.g., family policing, ICE); specific qualifications and requirements; limited availability (services only open at certain times); and simply not knowing what is available. Barriers to informal support are that families end up living apart from friends and family and lack opportunities to build networks through neighborhood institutions.

(continued on page 19)

Reasons We Chose to Go to a Particular Person or Group for Support

- We trust them and they are loyal. They never gave us a reason to not trust them.
- They know the struggle—they have been there.
- They are for the betterment of the community and are there because they are passionate about it.

- We choose to help each other—it's a give and take and it involves accountability on both of our parts. It is not about being mandated.
- There is no judgment or shame.
- They communicate and listen with respect. They respect boundaries.
- They have a relationship with us and with our family. They care about us and see us as people—not as a number or file.
- They have wisdom and experience that we can relate to and they know what they are talking about—not someone who is inexperienced and/or never had kids telling us how to raise kids.

INTERVIEW: MARILYN REYES

'When You Have Lived Experience, You Come with a Different Angle'

Harm reduction aims to reduce harm associated with drug use, built on a belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs. Here, Marilyn Reyes, co-director of the Peer Network of New York, says, "I never tell people what to do. I ask them what they want."

BY KEYNA FRANKLIN, ASSISTANT EDITOR, AND SHAKIRA PAIGE, CONTRIBUTOR

Q. What type of peer work do you do?

A. I do peer work with people who use drugs, helping people find services that work for them. I have also been affected by the family policing system. I'm a co-director of the [Peer Network of New York](#). We promote the empowerment of all peers through personal and professional development. I also work as a wellness advocate providing peer support. I respond to the emergency room when someone has an opioid overdose. I link them to services, give them Narcan and try to educate them. I never tell people what to do. I ask them what they want.

Q. How did you get involved in this work?

A. When I came home from prison, I was able to stay drug free. I got my kids back and had two more, and raised them all. I decided to do something to give back to my community. I had lived experience as a drug user and was formerly incarcerated. I got involved in harm reduction, which is meeting people where they are at and educating them about how to reduce the harms that come with whatever they're doing.

We all reduce harm. We close our door when we leave home to reduce the harm of someone coming into our apartment. Through peer work, we reduce harms around drug use and for sex workers and the homeless. We link people to services to keep them safe from HIV and Hep C, provide syringes to prevent infections, and train people to use and carry Narcan, which can reverse opioid overdose.

Q. Is lived experience a requirement of the job?

A. You have to have lived experience to do this job. People could study it or read about it, but when you have lived experience, you come with a different angle. Because you've been there, you're able to reach the person. They are dealing with the same issues you dealt with and got through. People trust people who have lived experience and can help them maneuver through systems and whatever they are trying to

change without stigma or judgment—with compassion and respect.

It would be great to have peer support from parents who experienced the family policing system. I didn't have that. It was a struggle, always fighting the system.

Q. How does lived experience help build connection and reduce isolation?

A. Having someone who can relate and has been through the same thing helps you to build trust and a relationship. When people come into these systems, they are not trusting and don't really want to share what they are going through. These systems are so punitive that people give up. The shame and guilt makes you hide and isolate.

Everybody's story is different, but we understand the pain, not trusting the system, being rejected. It gives you someone you can lean on and talk with, who can help you navigate. It's about treating people with dignity, respect, compassion and love.

Q. Are there ways you address stigma?

A. Language is powerful. Certain language creates stigma and judgment, and people turn away from services because of it. I say "drug free"—I don't say "clean" because I was never dirty. We [wrote a glossary](#) of people-first language to use when talking about drug use and people who use drugs. It is on the [Drug Policy Alliance website](#).

Language is also how you look at someone. Let's say I meet a homeless person and they have an odor. If I make a face, that makes them feel stigmatized and judged. I try to just have a conversation. You'd be surprised, when you come at someone with compassion.

Q. What would you like to see change?

A. Black and brown people need better and more services in the community. People need jobs. We are losing a lot of youth. They don't have training, trades, jobs. This pandemic isn't helping. I think peer support is awesome for all things. For family policing, someone taking you through the process who has been there, helping you to maneuver and find things—it would be great.

Q. How could you partner with a peer focused on preventing family policing system involvement?

A. I recently had a patient who was pregnant. She overdosed. ACS had all of her other kids. She wanted to get in a treatment program but kept getting rejected because she was on benzos. We need programs that will accept you, whatever medication you are on. I know what it is to be pregnant, using, and dealing with the family policing system. They are so punitive. If there were peers in my community who have been through that and could partner with me to work with this person, that would be beautiful. We could save more lives. ■



MARILYN REYES

(continued from page 17)

Parents see peers as knowing what to do and not to do, and what types of organizations to go to or avoid. Their knowledge and life experience both build trust. As Shonique added:

"It's easier when it's someone you can relate to. Everybody's story is going to be different, but if I can say, 'I lived here or I dealt with this hospital or clinic'—when you have something to relate to, that's where that trust is built. You don't have to tell your whole story, but you give a bit of empathy, and people are definitely more open to accepting services if they're ready."

BUILDING NEIGHBORLY CONNECTIONS

One strategy of peer support is to increase access to informal support—neighborly support or mutual aid—which is often the best, fastest and least intrusive form of support. The Peer Vision Team brainstormed the smallest informal resources that make a difference: a safe place to do laundry, hand-me-down baby clothes, toys, information about activities for kids, or a neighbor who can offer a meal, a Metrocard, or occasional babysitting.

As Peer Vision Team member Careena Farmer put it:

"There are so many ways to help make our communities better and to teach people not to be afraid to get help. Most assistance programs take too long to help—but mutual aid groups and community fridges where people donate and receive food on an immediate basis without fear can help prevent unnecessary ACS involvement."

Neighborly support can be structured. For instance, one Rise staff member shared how the PTA at her son's school set up a process to support parents and prevent hotline reports. When the school is considering making a report, school staff inform the PTA and Parent Coordinator. A peer informs the parent of the school's concern, offers supportive resources and checks in to try to help avert a report. This process has helped build toward a stronger culture of trust:

"A few months ago, a parent told us she wasn't sending her child to school because they were out of food and she was afraid that, if her

child said he was hungry, the school would call ACS. The team brought food to the family's home with no judgment, no fear—just the food they needed for that weekend, as the mother had lost her job. This is real community support. We also opened this kind of conversation into monthly meetings. Parents are really afraid to open up about our realities. Some said, 'We can't even be real. You're all mandated reporters.' The staff said, 'We're parents first. Let's talk things out and work together to figure them out.'"

Informal supports are often available without barriers and don't take the time of formal systems that require applications and documentation. However, parents without strong networks of friends nearby may not be able to access small favors. Peer and Community Supporters can intentionally build networks of mutual support and connections to existing mutual aid networks.

STRATEGIES FOR TRUSTED SUPPORT

Peer and Community Supporters also can help parents connect with trusted community organizations that rarely, if ever, involve their members with punitive systems like family policing or the police. Organizations that are accountable to their community and know the impact of systems have often developed their own safety responses. Rubén Austria, Executive Director of Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) explains:

"We have sought to establish—even with our system partners—that if there's a situation that is supposed to be reported, let our parent coaches first see if they can address and resolve that situation. Our partnership with probation has matured and become more understanding, and now the probation officer will sometimes say, 'This is a situation I'm mandated to report but if you could get a resolution on this issue within this amount of time, then I don't have to report it.'"

These organizations train their team to hold an organizational commitment to respond to families in crisis by supporting parents to resolve issues without making a hotline call. Often that requires a senior staff member taking responsibility for convening support, contacting other trusted providers in the community and having staff with the strongest personal relationships with the family check in frequently.

(continued on page 22)

Types of Support We've Wanted or Needed

- Babysitting, a break for parents
- Connection to therapy
- Food, chocolate, food to take home, a meal together
- Clothes
- Help finding a job
- Resources for going to school
- Self-care: Toiletries, haircut, laundry
- Someone to talk to with no judgment
- Metrocards, free transportation
- Information and resources, including about what is available in the community—as simple as that there is a sale on eggs
- Whatever that person needs at the time for what they are

experiencing (e.g., a cooler if their refrigerator broke) or to reach their goals (e.g., school)

- Diapers, baby-care supplies
- Holidays—turkeys, toys
- Gift cards, cash
- Furniture or furniture voucher
- Care for pet
- Activities for kids, opportunities to get involved in technology, opportunities for youth to work and get paid
- Programs that take kids out to the park or other fun activities
- Individual support, mentoring for kids, opportunities to go to different places and have different experiences, hope
- Access to bank accounts without fees/payments/minimum requirement so we can save
- Understanding what led to things, getting to the root

INTERVIEW: KELVIN TAITT

'Our First Priority Is Making Sure People Are OK'

BY KEYNA FRANKLIN, ASSISTANT EDITOR

Kelvin Taitt is the co-founder of [East Brooklyn Mutual Aid](#) and a community organizer in the Ocean Hill and Brownsville areas of Brooklyn, New York. East Brooklyn Mutual Aid explains that mutual aid is “about living in solidarity with one another, about exchanging resources to best support the community at large. People give what they can and take what they need—all without the expectation of receiving something in return.”

Q. What is mutual aid?

A. First and foremost, mutual aid is not charity. Mutual aid is a group of people in the community coming together to provide resources on a mutual level. You bring what you can to the table. I bring what I can to the table. Mutual aid involves people taking responsibility for their neighbors, communities and environment. Mutual aid is grounded in solidarity—we're all supporting each other, standing by each other and in this together.

Q. What does East Brooklyn Mutual Aid do? How is mutual aid different from services through the system?

A. We deliver groceries to our neighbors for free. We are 100% focused on food security and serve 200 families weekly.

You don't have to qualify to request groceries from East Brooklyn Mutual Aid. Anyone over 18 years old can make a request, for any household type or family size. As long as we have resources, funding and volunteers, there's no waiting list.

City agencies' systems of qualification take so long. When you sign up for SNAP or food stamps or food programs, you have to fill out an application, wait for an interview, be interviewed and then finally they send you a letter to let you know if you're approved. If you're approved, you have to go to the office and bring your ID and paperwork.

When the pandemic hit, a lot of our neighbors weren't eligible for SNAP because they had just lost work or were on furlough. Because their incomes were still in the system, they didn't qualify for support.

We were able to get families food when they were faced with the choice of paying rent or buying groceries. As a community-funded organization, we can act faster than a city organization because of all of their red tape. We made the choice not to become a 501 (nonprofit organization) because we don't want to be held back by restrictions or have to follow guidelines from the city to get funding. We don't want to do things that our community finds invasive or unnecessary.

Resources can be allocated to communities and we can build systems that work for us. We've done it and can continue to do it. We work with the city as long as their systems and resources work for us and our systems.

Q. How does mutual aid keep money and resources in the community and support investment in Black-owned businesses?

A. When we started the mutual aid group, we were working out of a community church. I connected with other mutual aid groups. There was an organization called [The Brooklyn Packers](#) that was sourcing and packing food at a bulk discount for any group that needed it. They had a contract to work as a packing company for [GetFoodNYC](#), a city program that provides produce boxes to NYC residents.

We collaborated with the Brooklyn Packers and allowed them to work in the space we were in. They were packing 1,000 boxes a day for people in Brownsville and across the city with GetFoodNYC. They had excess food and access to vendors and distributors that gave them discount wholesale rates. They offered, “We work with cooperative farms, Black-owned farms, and get bulk discount rates from distributors and supply chains because of our relationships. We can get you the best deals and allow you to stretch those dollars.” We started collaborating with them and they did our purchasing, as well. This saved us a ton of money because we weren't paying the 40% retail markup.

Mutual aid is grounded in solidarity—we're all supporting each other, standing by each other and in this together.

Because of their workload, the Brooklyn Packers offered opportunities for our volunteers to be paid to work with them. We were able to get 20 people jobs that were in our community and paid above minimum wage.

They are a cooperative—at the time, there were four owners. I was asked to work with them to help them scale up. I started working with them and they asked me to join their cooperative as the Director of Operations. We have been working with several mutual aid groups, helping them curate boxes and groceries for their communities below retail cost.

We've worked with the USDA in getting some of their coronavirus food assistance program boxes to Brownsville and to mutual aid groups and community fridges. We built an infrastructure that is Black owned and worker owned in East Brooklyn. It puts people to work in our community and helps to address the food insecurity problem in our community.

The Brooklyn Packers have been working with East Brooklyn Mutual Aid, Bed-Stuy Strong and a subgroup in Flatbush called the Kings County Senior Residency Mutual Aid. We've also worked with [Astoria Mutual Aid Network](#) and several food pantries. We've worked with countless organizations because we help control the supply chain. We're also working on farmland upstate—owning our own farm and growing our own food.

I took data from mutual aid groups and curated a program called Black Radish. It's a grocery bag that is \$35 and has 16 items—eggs, butter, chicken, produce, rice, flour, beans, etc., with home delivery. We also do bulk orders for all of the mutual aid groups. It saves them money and their neighbors get enough food for a family of four for a week. We're working on building systems that can work for any community.

I would love to build a food hub in every community that includes workforce development and housing. We can build a hub that has housing, and people that live in the building can be part of the workforce in that building. If we had more of those hubs, especially food-related hubs, our food insecurity problem could be solved. Give communities the power to own it and feed themselves—they'll nurture and grow it, especially if it's for their benefit, our benefit.

Q. How does East Brooklyn Mutual Aid work with other mutual aid groups?

A. We are part of a [mutual aid network](#). There are over [50 different mutual aid groups across the five boroughs](#). We work hand-in-hand. When we first started, [Crown Heights Mutual Aid](#) supported us for a couple of weeks until we were able to support ourselves with community donations. We've had volunteers come from Bed-Stuy and Flatbush when we needed drivers. Other communities put the word out to their volunteers and shared resources. There's a really amazing network of people that care and they've been very supportive.



KELVIN TAITT

Q. How does mutual aid center and build relationships in the community?

A. Our first priority is making sure people are OK. With SNAP programs, it's about the system and how people navigate it, instead of the person and their needs. We put their needs first. If you have a need, we provide food, no questions asked. We

don't force you to fill out a ton of paperwork to qualify—just basic information so we can get it to you.

You don't have to do something grand to make a difference. Calling to check on your neighbors is enough—asking if anybody needs anything when you run out. I'm grateful for the community that I live in because we have that type of rapport with each other. I can go to my neighbors across the street and ask for a cup of sugar and actually get it.

I'm taking time off for my birthday, and my neighbor offered to watch my dog. This is the type of community that we need more of and will thrive in. It's more than food security—it is mental health, financial stability, resources, awareness and education. There are many resources and

supports that mutual aid can provide.

Wealthier communities have systems that they rely on in their community and can stay within themselves because they have everything they need. We should take a page from that book and start building things, with the people that live here owning the things we build. If we're living in it or working there, we should own it. We should share the profits if we're doing the work, and we should share in the property if we're living there.

[Mutual Aid NYC](#) is a network of groups organizing to provide aid and support to New Yorkers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Call the hotline at 646-437-8080 for support or visit the website to learn about resources, get help and/or get involved. ■

(continued from page 19)

CCFY's Director of Training Amelia Frank adds:

"We've established a team approach—there's no parent or mentor just out there having to make these decisions. Mentors bring it back to the team and we collectively come up with all the possible options and then try to invite the family to make the best possible decision for themselves. We can't just do nothing, that's not going to work, that's not functional. Part of the reason we spend so much time building relationships is so we can have honest conversations around what's non-negotiable—but we can help with seeing what option feels right to them and how can we support them."

Similarly, Diana Autin, Executive Director at SPAN, describes practices that have essentially eliminated reporting by SPAN:

"In New Jersey, every resident is a mandated reporter—no matter who you work for or whether you don't work for anybody, everyone is a mandated reporter. At SPAN, we have protocols for reporting and a training about the mandated reporting categories. In the last 10 years, we have only reported one person. That's because we require anybody who feels they want to report to document that the situation meets the criteria and talk with the Director of Individual Assistance before reporting, to make sure the situation meets the criteria for mandatory reporting. Some people think that if a child is living in an apartment with water running down the walls, they should report that. No, what they should do is report the landlord, not the family. SPAN has somebody in that position who is very well versed in what child abuse is and isn't and knows that a lot of bad things happen from reporting—and also that the vast majority of reporting is not found to be actionable. By putting that in place, we've been able to limit, to a great degree, any reporting by anybody."

Because these strategies and practices often aren't—and can't be—spoken about publicly, policymakers and even many community members may not be directly aware of how community groups de-escalate potential crises and support safety. However, longtime community members often

know the organizations with good reputations for the resources and care they provide. Peer Supporters can steer parents to these organizations and can track parents' experiences so their referrals become even more trustworthy over time.

In some cities and states, early legal representation is an option for parents under investigation or concerned about their families. Parents can access legal representation and the support of a social worker or parent advocate to inform them of their rights and choices and partner with them to address challenges. For example, the legal team may work with a family to navigate a housing crisis or conflict with a school. Peer and Community Supporters can raise awareness and connect parents to [early legal representation](#).

One strategy of peer support is to increase access to informal support—neighborly support or mutual aid—which is often the best, fastest and least intrusive form of support.

RESPONDING TO SERIOUS DISTRESS OR HARM

Peer and Community Supporters may also have to navigate how to respond to unsafe situations or instances of harm. While physical and sexual abuse make up only a small portion of family policing system cases, peers may connect with families in serious distress and will need a shared commitment to principles of response.

Practices for safety can include:

- Being clear with parents about any actions that are harmful to children and would make family policing system involvement likely.
- Telling someone safe what the family is going through and using tools and training related to safety planning and de-escalation. Peers can bring concerns to their Buddies and peer support circle to discuss all available options and to make sure they are keeping themselves safe. They can engage their Buddy or senior program staff in meeting with a family to make a plan.
- Engaging legal support if possible. In NYC, peers can immediately [connect parents with early legal representation](#) to talk confidentially. A lawyer, parent advocate or social worker can have an urgent response and say, "You are at risk, let's make a safety plan," and the legal team can stick with the family as they carry that out.
- Supporting parents in preparing to seek out services that require engaging mandated reporters. Peer supporters can help families prepare for conversations and understand the risks to their family.

It's important to remember that reports don't actually protect children—

Language that Recognizes People's Full Dignity

Our Peer Vision Team discussed the importance of using language that is respectful and recognizes people in their full dignity and humanity. Parents said that people may reject "help," because that wording may create a sense of vulnerability and loss of control, and may bring up trauma and trust concerns.

It is different to support someone in their own plans and goals. This goes beyond words—it is also about body language and tone of voice.

RESOURCES

- [An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language](#) by

Eddie Ellis, [The Center for NuLeadership on Human Justice and Healing](#)

■ [Talking About Drug Use: A Glossary for Elected Officials](#) by the Drug Policy Alliance, in partnership with the Peer Network of New York

"It's important to change the language used to talk to parents. Parents feel good when you address them as the parent—not 'birth parent,' a term often used by the family policing system. If you have an event or want people to join something, you can call them participants—not clients. The word 'client' makes it seem like they are a number and the parent is not important to the person that is supporting them. I am not going to say 'help,' because people don't need help—they need support."

—Keyna Franklin

it's the response to crisis that matters and children are often harmed in the foster system.

Peer care is likely to, overall, increase safety and opportunities for response before a situation escalates. Fear of a judgmental or punitive response paradoxically limits opportunities for honest conversation about harm, accountability and safety. In safe, trusting, connected relationships, people are more likely to share when we've made a mistake or caused harm, or name harm we've experienced or are worried may take place. This can increase opportunities for healing, prevent harm and create space for families to thrive.

MAKING SPACE FOR FAMILY FUN AND JOY

Community care to support strong communities is not only about meeting basic needs and responding to crises. It's also about increasing access to positive experiences for joy and rest to reduce stress and build relationships. Peer and Community Supporters can help organize community events and document families' needs for opportunities to take breaks and have fun.

Parents in the Peer Vision Team said:

"Fun times together as a family are really important—to spend time with each other, celebrate and feel appreciated. When you are going through stressful things, you can think of memories of good times with people you care about."

"Opportunities to connect with other parents, especially other single moms, can help build parents up so we feel good about ourselves. People go through a lot and experience isolation. It's helpful to talk to other people and get advice."

"It would be helpful to be able to have childcare for a few hours



JEANETTE VEGA'S SON, JOSEPH

when we need it. It is important to create space for parents and kids to get away from each other and have a breather. This allows parents to go to an appointment, get our hair done, have a break or go grocery shopping on our own. This might be through community centers and afterschool programs that offer kids help with homework, access to a computer lab, or activities like dance and karate. For families, it would reduce stress, frustration, tension and conflict."

ADVOCATING TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY NEEDS

Lastly, Peer and Community Supporters can play an important role in driving advocacy by identifying existing community strengths and resources that can be further invested in, as well as documenting resource

gaps and barriers. In addition to speaking from their own experience, they will regularly hear from their community, developing collective knowledge that can inform and strengthen advocacy.

Peer supporters can also connect parents to opportunities to build their leadership skills and get involved in community-led organizing around quality-of-life issues for families, and/or organizing focused on the family policing system, contributing to a stronger political base in impacted communities. This will provide one ongoing way for those closest to the issues to be experts in knowing what communities identify as solutions and want and need to be safe and thrive.

In NYC, Rise envisions a citywide network of Peer and Community Supporters working in collaboration and solidarity with advocates from legal agencies, survivor-led movements and intersecting justice movements who share a similar philosophy and values (e.g., credible messengers, harm reduction and birth justice advocates, mutual aid networks, restorative and transformative justice and community-based healing spaces).

Building a Vision for Organizing and Community Care

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Over the past eight months, Rise's organizing team held nine community conversations led by and for parents impacted by ACS as part of a [Participatory Action Research \(PAR\) Project to develop a Parents' Platform](#) for advocacy. In these community conversations, parents share their experiences and thoughts on root causes of family stress and systems involvement, identify problems and solutions and reimagine what real support for families looks like. In these discussions, parents have called for peer support, information, resources and opportunities for their families and communities. These themes informed our peer and community care model. Later this year, Rise plans to publish a report sharing data and recommendations from the PAR project.

COMMUNITY CARE NETWORKS

In envisioning collective care, Rise's organizing team developed this definition of a Community Care Network:

The set of people and places in your life that help you to achieve your goals and care for you during difficult times. Your Community Care Network might include people like neighbors, friends, family, faith leaders and many others. Your Community Care Network may also include places like faith-based groups, community centers, clubs, building associations, co-worker hangouts, and so on. It may even include online resources like Facebook groups, chat rooms, and group texts. This system is usually composed of groups that are grassroots-/community-led and are NOT affiliated with punitive government systems.

Peer and Community Supporters can become part of parents' trusted, chosen Community Care Networks.

Get involved with Rise's community organizing:
organizing@risemagazine.org

PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

We Need a Childhood Protection Service

BY KEYNA FRANKLIN, ASSISTANT EDITOR

When my children were in foster care, it was hard for them to be children. They were 4, 9, 11 and 12 years old, but they were forced to be in adult business.

Instead of being asked questions like, "How was your day in school?" or, "What things do you like doing?" the ACS worker would ask them questions like, "Did your mom hit you?" or, "Did your mom do anything to you?" or, "Do you *want* to go home?" to see if they could make the case bigger than what it was.

Every Thursday when they came out of school, I saw my children for three hours. I was on time all the time. I brought them toys, clothes and food that they liked so they knew that I didn't forget about them.

Luckily there was one other place where my children were allowed to be children, and that was at a youth center in the Bronx. The foster mother took them, and it helped them not focus on being in care and not seeing me every day. They did activities like football, basketball, dance.

My kids told me about all the fun they had. When my daughter asked me to come to a show she was in, I was impressed. I said to myself, "This is a place for my children to be at."

LIVING WITH FEAR

My kids' time in care felt like years though it was really just one year. Even when they came back home, it was still hard for my kids to be kids.

Every time someone was at the door, they would think ACS was coming for them.

It took about a year for them to stop worrying.

The other difficult part was that we moved to Brooklyn where they didn't know anyone. It helped that they could still go to the community center.

A PLACE TO FEEL GOOD

My sons like to play basketball so the center put them on a team to show their talent and skills. My daughters like to dance and model, so they put them on a dance team and in a fashion show every year.

When my daughters dressed up and walked down the runway, they felt good to have people watch them and clap for them. But when my sons played games, they didn't care if people were watching—when I was there to watch, that's all that mattered to them.

The center was almost two hours each way, but it was worth it. Eventually we moved back up to the Bronx, just a few minutes from the center, so they could be there all the time.

I also got involved at the center as a volunteer. A few years ago the center asked me and some other parents to join the fashion show. We had to dress up with our girls like twins. We

went shopping and bought the same sneakers, the same shirts that said "Love" on them in red and pink, and the same blue jeans.

Everything was going smoothly until I realized, 20 minutes before show time, that I'd left my shirt at home. I laughed and the kids laughed at me as well. Then one of my children ran home to get my shirt. After that, I realized that I had brought mismatched socks! I had no choice but to wear mismatched socks on the runway, but everyone laughed and seemed to love it.

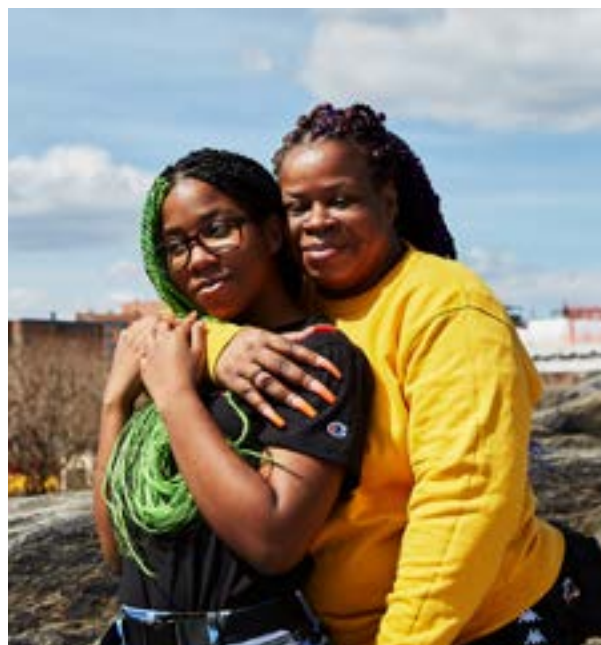
During the show, kids danced, sang, rapped. The lights were low and the audience was filled with parents who clapped for everyone. Seeing the happy looks on my daughters' faces as they walked the runway made their time in foster care feel very far away.

PROTECTION FROM CHILD PROTECTION

The community center let my kids be kids and stay out of the street. My children are big now and don't have to worry about ACS. But they still go to the center. It has been seven years.

In addition to being a place for children, the community center helps families because they know what families need from day to day. If families need food and clothing, they have a food drive and a clothing drive. They feed families, give them a hot meal. On holidays, they give out turkeys so families will have Thanksgiving and Christmas meals, and make sure kids will have gifts under the tree.

Families need more places like the center. For families under stress, organizations like the center can be a place to feel joy and togetherness and to share resources. If more of our community was like this, there would be fewer investigations and less surveillance in the Black and brown community and less involvement with family policing systems. ■



KEYNA AND HER DAUGHTER KIMORA

Community Resource Mapping

Our Peer Vision Team drew community resource maps to recognize the resources our families value and use in our communities, such as libraries and youth programs, and those they must travel to access, including supermarkets and indoor spaces for children in winter, like museums. This activity helped us visualize and learn about resources available in each other's communities and throughout the city, understand what families consider good resources that they use, and even think differently about resources in our own community.

When we started our conversation, we weren't always aware of what was in our area that is or could be a support to us and other people—such as community organizations and the resources and spaces they offer (e.g., space to have a community gathering or a child's birthday celebration). We discussed what would make existing spaces more accessible and family friendly.

Our network of peer and community supporters can draw and discuss community maps together to share information about resources and build our resource guide. It will also help us identify and explore gaps and needs as we reimagine resources, support and opportunities for joy for families in our communities.



Jeanette: Fun, low-cost activities to do with my boys are helpful in keeping them entertained and thriving within their community. McDonald's is our favorite spot for family fun nights!



Imani: We need more parks, recreational centers and free activities for families! Some centers charge a fee which is harder for families.



Tenisha: My dream is to facilitate and advocate for people in my community.



Tyrenea: My college, therapy, playground and deli are all important to me!



Keyna: The community center and park in my neighborhood support parents in having a place for their children to go.



Paige: Family time is important for supporting my children's learning and well being!

'Doing Activities Together Brings Us Closer and Helps Us Relax and Have Fun'

BY SARA WERNER, RISE CONTRIBUTOR

For fun, my son Aaron and I like to go to museums, playgrounds and zoos.

Our favorite museum is Brooklyn Children's Museum. There is so much to do there that even if you go a lot, you will always find something new to entertain you. Aaron loves to go in the sand box, look at pretend animals, build in the block lab, play with colored sand and use the water table.

We also like the Jewish Children's Museum, the Children's Museum of Manhattan, New York Hall of Science, Brooklyn Museum, American Museum of Natural History and the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum. Most of these places have pay-as-you-wish days. At the Brooklyn Children's Museum and the Intrepid (which is usually very expensive), you can get in free any time using your EBT card plus identification.

Our favorite playgrounds are Wingate Park, Prospect Park, Central Park, Union Square Park, Domino Park and Brooklyn Bridge Park. The zoos we like are Prospect Park Zoo and the Bronx Zoo.

My favorite is the library because that's where I get good information. It's also where I taught Aaron that reading is fun—that he can pick any book he wants and be part of great adventures.

Sitting at home and doing nothing doesn't seem so bad, right? You can sleep late, play on electronics all day. But that gets boring and lonely and leads to stress.

I like to see Aaron happy and to see that he is social and can make friends easily. Doing these things together brings us closer and helps us relax and have fun.

The places we go feel safe because we go there often and get to know people. When I see other kids Aaron's age, I can talk to their families and see if their behaviors and developments are similar, and also ask them what they did in certain situations.

It is good that we have favorite activities that aren't too far from home—we can walk there. I take Access-A-Ride for many of our trips, but that is costing me. I am working on an application that will allow me to pay half price, but the documentation you need makes it a process.

It is so important that all families should be able to do things whether they have money or don't. All families deserve to be relaxed and have fun.



My son Aaron having fun at Wingate Park.



One of the many activities we do when we go to TheZone.

Joy in Community

Sara Werner highlights places where she and her son go to have fun in their community in Brooklyn—and when they go outside of the city, too.



Aaron at his Martial Arts school. He just received his white belt and is very proud. Aaron goes to Martial Arts classes three times a week. He is currently working on advancing to the yellow belt.



Our backyard. The kids from our building love to play back here, especially when there is a ton of snow on the ground. Even I have fun in the snow!



Aaron at Brooklyn Children's Museum. He loves this bike. I have pictures of him on this bike from at least 12 different occasions!



Aaron and I are part of a program called Oorah. We get holiday boxes with supplies for each holiday, learn about our Jewish culture, and every year we go for a fun getaway in Stamford, NY at a place called TheZone. Don't you just love hayrides in such a beautiful location?

'Our Communities Are Resource Rich': Peers Can Help Families Connect to Available Resources

Juan PaPo Santiago, Program Coordinator,

Community Navigator Program: A lot of the reason we have instances of crime in the community is lack of resources—or lack of access to resources, because East Harlem is resource rich. However, if you ask somebody for a particular kind of help, they might not know where to turn. The idea is that if word gets around that people from East Harlem are helping people from East Harlem get food, get jobs, go back to school or get into college and have futures for their children, the mindset of abundance overtakes the mindset of scarcity.

Shonique Hill, Community Navigator: I'm from East Harlem. I approach everything I do as a Navigator as if I'm speaking to myself as a resident. A lot of people from East Harlem are very private. It's not just about the lack of resources or the fact that there aren't resources. Some people are scared to go to these resources and be open and say, "This is what I need."

We work with youth to try to avoid them becoming that 18-21 year old who has to work even harder to get out of the system. If we can get the mom or youth a job or back in school, it brings positivity back into that household and pushes everyone forward. If everybody in East Harlem participates and gets what they need, the neighborhood will grow and be much more positive.



PART OF THE COMMUNITY NAVIGATOR PROGRAM TEAM

INTERVIEW: DR. CHRISTINA BETHELL

The Importance of Promoting the Positive

An interview with Dr. Christina Bethell, director of the Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, who discusses her research on Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs). Her work looks at the opposite of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), like abuse and family separation, that can cause long-term physical and mental health problems.

We need to proactively promote the positive for everyone because the presence of certain positive factors supports healthy development. For example, having a caring adult in your life is a positive experience. It is very important that children feel safe and feel that they can communicate their feelings and needs—that someone is attuning to them when they are having a hard time.

That is the factor that has the greatest impact for buffering the negative impacts of adverse experiences. My research found that when the need for a caring adult was met in childhood, the odds were 72% less that people had depression or poor mental health as adults, even after adjusting for adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Those with more positive childhood experiences (PCEs) were 3.5 times more likely to have the social and emotional support they needed as adults.



CHRISTINA BETHELL

The specific positive childhood experiences that we studied were family resilience, talking with each other about problems as a family, identifying and celebrating strengths and making a resilience plan that expects people to have difficult times. This means that you make a plan, saying: “What are we going to do when mom is struggling? How are we going to support the child?” Expect everyone to be part of this family resilience plan and make a plan tailored for what each person needs and wants when they are having a hard time.

Our study showed the importance of children feeling belonging in their school, community or church—that they enjoy participating in activities that give a sense of being part of a community. People who had those experiences as children were 70% less likely to experience depression as an adult. Just as adverse experiences stick with us, so do the positive.

Creating a positive cultural norm in a community is a process. One of the first parts is coming together to see what opportunities and risks are there. Communities can come together in a structured way with intention to tell the stories of what is being experienced, build on the resources they have, lobby to get more support if needed and be active in their destiny.

Condensed and excerpted from [Promoting the Positive: The importance of supporting positive childhood experiences and healing in families, schools and communities](#) by Keyna Franklin, Assistant Editor

Ideas for Community Events

Our workgroup brainstormed ideas for community events to raise awareness, build relationships (family and community), share our skills, have fun together and have a break:

- Make up your face
- Hairstyles and free haircuts
- Nails
- Arts and crafts
- Family fun time, box and board games—opportunities available without cost
- Classes, groups and events for families and for family members separately (e.g., BBQ contest for dads)

- Sharing knowledge of free fun activities (e.g., Culture Pass to go to museums)
- Health, mental health and wellness activities and information



COMMUNITY-BUILDING ACTIVITY DURING RISE & SHINE



EVIDENCE

How Peer Support Offers Safety That Isn't About Punishment

Increasingly, grassroots community-led organizations are proving that safety isn't about policing or punishment. Research evidence of similar models and efforts to provide resources shows that investing in peer support and in families and communities is effective. It can prevent and reduce system involvement and strengthen well-being.

Some highlights include:

PREVENTING CRIMINAL / JUVENILE LEGAL SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

The New York City-based [Arches Transformative Mentoring program](#) utilizes an evidence-based curriculum in groups facilitated by credible messengers—"direct service professionals with backgrounds similar to the populations they serve." A study showed that Arches reduces "one-year felony reconviction by over two-thirds and reduces two-year felony reconviction by over half."

In CCFY's [South Bronx Community Connections \(SBCC\) model](#), "a network of faith and community organizations in a given police precinct form a network to engage youth who have been arrested in mentoring and positive youth development activities." SBCC is a community-driven, positive youth development approach that connects youth to their

Grassroots community-led organizations are proving that safety isn't about policing or punishment.

communities through youth-led civic engagement projects with credible messenger mentors. A study found that youth in the program were less likely to be re-arrested or have new charges brought against them when compared to similarly situated youth in the Bronx. "Furthermore, more than half of youth served voluntarily stayed engaged well after their court mandate expired, and the program achieved unprecedented levels of family engagement."

COMMUNITY VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Through [Cure Violence](#), community members are paid and trained to anticipate where violence will occur and intervene, working with culturally appropriate outreach workers. Violence interrupters and outreach workers "prevent shootings by identifying and mediating potentially lethal conflicts in the community, and following up to ensure the conflict does not reignite." [Multiple independent evaluations of the model](#) have shown that [violence interrupters reduce shootings and homicides](#).

ACCESSING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING

A specialized hospital in New Jersey found that parents connected to SPAN Family Resource Specialists who were peers of their racial, ethnic and language background were more likely to follow up on screenings by accessing evaluations than white, English-speaking parents.

SCHOOL SAFETY AND SUCCESS

Schenectady, New York, implemented trauma-sensitive school practices that included credible messenger-type support. The schools ended use of School Safety Agents (school police) and engaged elders and community members as cultural brokers. The role of cultural brokers was not to act as security or keep students out of the classroom, but to diffuse school-based conflict and get students back into the classroom faster. This change

reduced the number of conflicts by about one-third.

Additionally, the schools created a suspension-diversion program, offering a diagnostic and therapeutic optional alternative to suspension, and connecting youth with services. Schenectady schools have a 13% overall drop-out rate and 25% of students who undergo the traditional suspension process drop out. However, fewer than 2% of students who complete the diversion program drop out. Even students who start the diversion process but do not finish do better, with only 10% dropping out. This data was shared in a presentation by Katrina Feldkamp of [the Bronx Healing-Centered Schools Working Group](#) based on a trip to Schenectady's trauma-sensitive schools.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

■ Improving families' financial circumstances is effective for reducing state intervention in families. For example, [a study published in Children and Youth Services Review](#) found "that increases in the minimum wage lead to a decline in overall child maltreatment reports, particularly neglect reports." They found that a \$1 increase in the minimum wage creates a statistically significant (9.6%) decline in neglect reports. On the other hand, [restrictions on access to benefits \(TANF\)](#) and [increases in eviction notices](#) have been linked to increased cases.

Researcher Kelley Fong [elaborates](#):

"We know from research that preventing child maltreatment involves providing families the resources they need to care for their children. There's research on the impact of the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#), [childcare subsidies](#), [housing](#) and other supports that aren't about fixing parents' behavior. These approaches to supporting families are really effective without creating fear and distrust.

"Beyond providing benefits and resources to individual parents, we need to invest in impacted communities by providing resources for schools, parks, public transit and after-school programs. These investments aren't typically considered child

maltreatment prevention services but need to be central in our thinking about how to support families."

■ On [MillionExperiments.com](#), explore snapshots of emerging community-based safety strategies that expand our ideas about what keeps us safe.

■ [BEAM](#) (Black Emotional And Mental Health) Collective offers [tool kits and resources](#) including Community and Self Care Support Plans and Community Care Maps to explore, plan out, map and build support systems and community support needs.

■ "[How Police Became the Go-To Response to Domestic Violence](#)" by Aya Gruber highlights how resources such as cash and food can reduce domestic violence and how housing and childcare can increase safety.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

The long-term effects we expect from building networks of peer support include:

1. Improving the health, educational success and mental health of parents and children by reducing the stress burdens on families;
2. Strengthening the self-advocacy capacity of hundreds and ultimately thousands of parents in our communities where surviving and thriving require strong capacities for self-advocacy and robust support networks;
3. Increasing parents' power to make a difference in their community lives, not only interpersonally but also by connecting parents to aligned community organizing and leadership opportunities and by supporting the sense of self-determination, hope and community required for advocacy; to address inequities;
4. Improving community design, institutions and resources by networking parents to document needs in their communities and connecting parents to advocacy.



KELLEY FONG



RISE STAFF AND FAMILY MEMBERS AT A COMMUNITY EVENT IN THE BRONX



MAKING IT HAPPEN

How You Can Be Involved in Building Networks of Parent Peer Care

Rise has learned from the innovative work done by people ahead of us, and we aim to build on that foundation in NYC. We hope parents, activists and community leaders pushing for alternative approaches and structural solutions to societal problems will join us in advocating for this model nationwide.

This work can start small. Parents and parent- and community-led organizations can build out peer support within their own organizational culture and values, while planting seeds toward a strong and connected network of peer care throughout the city and state.

In NYC, we invite community-led organizations to partner with us to develop the vision and infrastructure for this network of care.

Implementation will be complex, and we welcome collaboration to realize the infrastructure for training and supporting peer care supporters. At the micro level, we welcome space to hold circle. Organizations with a spare conference room, coffee maker, closet, or fridge have critical resources for allyship!

When we get further along, Rise will seek to connect with organizations that want to host or train staff members as Community Supporters who can provide a deeper level of support to families. The partnership of a network of community-based groups, organizations and intersecting justice movements will be essential. We hope that together we can develop a more expansive and accessible network, reaching more communities throughout New York City and making support available in multiple languages. This work will need to be carefully done, in partnership, or

oppressive patterns will repeat themselves, despite the best intentions.

AN ESSENTIAL INVESTMENT

This Peer Care model will require a significant investment to be effective and successfully taken to scale in impacted communities. We also invite allyship to consider how philanthropy and government can be leveraged to add this crucial layer of peer care within communities.

In NYC, government and philanthropy have invested heavily in credible messenger work related to the criminal legal system and mentoring for young people leaving the foster system. Investing in parent peer support is an opportunity to address the harsh reality of survival and stress

impacting so many parents, which is part of rooting a different future for children. Easing the burden of stress on families is an investment we can't afford not to make.

Public funding can be made available by shifting resources away from investigations and other systems and tactics of surveillance, violence and

oppression. With legislative action to limit mandated reporting and require the family policing system to more frequently screen out reports and close out unnecessary investigations, resources can be shifted to real support families need and want.

Get involved:

- [Connect with us](#) about this model and get involved
- [Lend space for circle](#)

We invite allyship to consider how philanthropy and government can be leveraged to add this crucial layer of peer care within communities.

- [Join our advisory committee](#) to support design and implementation
- [Get involved](#) with [Rise's Parents' Platform for NYC](#)

ONE IMMEDIATE STRATEGY TOWARD LIBERATION

In the past year, calls to abolish systems of policing and punishment—including family policing—and to invest in communities and community-led solutions have rung out across NYC and nationwide. It is possible to operationalize a paradigm of family support that moves away from mandated reporting and state intervention as an ineffective front line for child safety. Clearly, we can better shield parents and children from stress by meeting material needs, building connection, supporting joy and working toward liberation.

It's critical to reorganize structures of family support so that the fundamentals of family life including living wages, employment protections,

health care, childcare, quality schools, food access and neighborhood institutions are strong for all families. It's crucial to ensure that crisis resources are not accompanied by surveillance or threat of separation.

Along with advocacy to fight for essential rights and resources, there is also a need to intentionally build neighborhood networks of collective care to combat the displacement, isolation, punishment and fear so often created by public policy itself. As Dorothy Roberts explains, "We need to work on better and more loving, caring and compassionate ways of addressing harm."

Peer care is one immediate strategy that can contribute to a shift away from a system that views parents as the problem, to community-led support that recognizes that parents know their family's solutions. Through caring networks to resolve crises and seed joy, more families can thrive. ■

Further Reading

Rise stories, interviews and publications by parents impacted by the family policing system.

SURVEILLANCE

[Targeted by Two Systems: 'I couldn't focus only on how devastating it was for my child to be hurt and to lose my mother. I also had to worry about ACS.'](#) By Imani Worthy

[A Punishment Worse Than the Crime—I was charged with abuse but my kids were harmed in foster care.](#) By Shakira Paige

[We Just Needed Support. Instead, ACS tore us apart.](#) By Careena Farmer

[New Research: How Fear of CPS Harms Families](#)
Interview with Kelley Fong. By Keyna Franklin and Careena Farmer

[Surveillance Isn't Safety](#) (Series)

[The Price of Parenting While Poor](#) (Issue)

INTERGENERATIONAL HARM

['I Was Denied the Right to Keep My Family Intact'—Black families like mine have been separated for generations.](#) By Amber Wilkes-Smith

[Generations in Foster Care](#) (Issue)

RECOMMENDATIONS AND TESTIMONY

[Target Conditions, Not Families](#)

Parents call on NYC's next mayor and City Council to reverse our city's over-investment in family policing and under-investment in communities.

[Parents to City Council: Fund Communities, Not ACS](#)

[Rise Recommendations to Address Schools' Over-Reporting to Child Protective Services](#)

PEER SUPPORT

[One Safe Place](#) by Nicole Goodwin

[The Company of Women—Support groups and art therapy help me heal.](#) by Ella Verez

EARLY LEGAL REPRESENTATION

[A Parent's Ally: Providing "A Bridge" for Parents in Early Legal Representation](#)
Interview with Ilesha Hammons, Parent Ally at Legal Services of New Jersey. By Keyna Franklin

[How Early Legal Representation Can Protect Families](#)
Interview with Emma Ketteringham, managing director of The Bronx Defenders' Family Defense Project. By Careena Farmer, Melissa Landrau, Sara Werner and Keyna Franklin

[Protecting Families from Poverty—and CPS: How Early Legal Representation is Working in New Jersey](#)
Interview with Jey Rajaraman, Chief Counsel at Legal Services of New Jersey. By Keyna Franklin and Cynthia Zizola

Access more stories and interviews related to parents' rights on the Rise webpage [Legal Rights and Information](#).

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

Building Safety in Community Through Restorative Justice

Over the past year, Ashley Ellis, co-founder of [B.R.E.A.T.H.E. Collective](#), trained all Rise staff on restorative justice circle keeping. Here, she discusses how restorative justice (RJ) training can support healing and prevent and address harm. She responds to the question, “How can people feel safe enough to show up and ask for support without shame or fear of punishment?”

INTERVIEW BY SHAKIRA PAIGE, RISE CONTRIBUTOR

When you finish training in holding circle and RJ, you understand the power of being able to share your story in community, in a safe space. People grow through telling their story. I've heard someone say, “My whole life, it wasn't okay for me to cry. I lost people in my life and never felt permission to express my emotions. It became anger because I couldn't grieve. I took that out on people because I didn't have another outlet. What I've discovered here is that it's OK for me to name when I'm not OK, to cry, to be vulnerable. I could see other men in my community being vulnerable.”

You learn and grow in this culture and safe space that you helped to co-create by determining what is safe for you. You develop trust through hearing other people tell their stories. Those are some of the things that folks walk away with—they're able to discover and create a sacred safe space so that they're able to show up authentically and have honest, courageous, vulnerable dialogues, to share their stories and listen to other people. They learn how to take accountability—to say, “I created this harm, but I also want to do something to make it right. I want to heal this relationship.” It's not just about apologizing or forgiving, but learning to take action—doing that with community.

NAMING HARM

This sense of being in community is one of the biggest things people walk away with. I think about the African term, 'Ubuntu'—“I am because you are.” In circles, you experience a deep sense of interconnectedness, that my relationship to you and to Earth and to everything around me matters in this moment.

It is about building trust and deep relationships where people aren't experiencing shame or punishment for acknowledging truths that they have created harm. In deep relationships, people are more likely to acknowledge and own harm they've created and to name harm they've experienced. Sometimes,

we don't want to even name something as harmful, because we think that is going to hurt somebody or we won't be believed or we aren't sure how people will hold our stories.

IN PRACTICE OF MODELING VULNERABILITY

As much as we are trying to change the system, I believe we also have to change ourselves. If we change the system, but we are still replicating what that system represents, then what? We need to think about how to create a community that is strong and connected and is in constant practice of modeling vulnerability, sharing stories and asking folks how they're doing. When that becomes a constant practice, people begin to trust you and trust the space. We have to do that transformative work.

Folks need proof that if they show up in their weakest moment, you're not going to turn them in, manage them, or shame them.

We rely so much on systems that perpetuate harm. Part of it is because we don't know the people in our community or our circle. With small circles, if five of us show up, maybe we don't have what is needed, but between us, we could have connections to 10 circles—and in that way we do have what is needed. It's about mutual aid, deepening relationships and modeling what it means to be vulnerable.



ASHLEY ELLIS

TRANSFORM INDIVIDUALS AND CONDITIONS

We have to do it not just through restorative justice, but transformative justice—not just healing the harm in a relationship, but transforming the conditions that created the harm in the first place. How do we transform or get rid of the system and build what needs to be in place, that will allow me to show up and say, “I don't have my stuff together. I don't have what I need. I'm not at my best. Can you watch my kids while I get myself

together?” You don't judge me and hold it over my head. There is no punishment. Imagine that—if people are so connected and community is able to show up.

Folks need proof that if they show up in their weakest moment, you're not going to turn them in, manage them or shame them. Their story won't be weaponized against them and used as a reason to call the system, causing further harm and disconnection. When people experience that and see that harm will not happen, they're most likely to show up and ask for what they need. That helps to deepen trust and allows people to let their guard down. As a community, we can look for ways to share stories of transformative decision making. ■

Rise
224 W. 30th St. #804
New York, NY 10001
(646) 543-7099

risemagazine.org

