

United with Parents Reunification Collaborative Final Report

Rise
Center for the Study of Social
Policy (CSSP)
Summer 2021

Acknowledgments

This report was written by Nora McCarthy and Jeanette Vega at Rise and Steve Cohen at the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and reflects the input of staff of the six child welfare agencies that were part of the two-year Reunification Collaborative (Children’s Aid, Graham, Heartshare, JCCA, Rising Ground, and SCO). In particular, we note the input of parent advocates on staff at these agencies, who provided additional input on the Collaborative practices and process, and of Teresa Marrero, an advocate at Heartshare who joined the Rise team mid-way through this project.

We thank those who funded and supported this project: The Administration for Children’s Services, DeCamp Foundation, JPB Foundation, Child Welfare Fund and the agencies themselves, as well as staff at the Center for the Study of Social Policy who provided guidance, especially Stephanie Doyle. We are grateful to leadership at these agencies for investing in this project and in parent-led solutions in child welfare.

Reunification Collaborative: Final Report

Rise and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) along with six child welfare agencies (Children's Aid, Graham, Heartshare, JCCA, Rising Ground, and SCO) launched the United with Parents Reunification Collaborative in June 2019 with two goals:

1. To develop improved methods for foster care agencies to work with parents, leading to more rapid reunification.
2. To model and learn from a network approach to innovation and improvement, keeping the experience of parents and front-line workers central to the work.

The six agencies had previous experience working with Rise, and they expressed a need to support parents differently in order to more frequently and quickly achieve reunification. Their CEO's each agreed to designate a team including at least a parent advocate, caseworker and supervisor, along with access to data/CQI staff; to share data among the participating agencies; and to pay a modest amount each year towards the cost of the project. Funding was provided by ACS along with philanthropic donors including the DeCamp Foundation, the JPB Foundation and the Child Welfare Fund.

Project Design

When the collaborative began, participants intended to develop and test practices that could improve how agency staff worked with parents. We did not yet know what those practices would be, but we had in mind both a *way of working* and a *set of beliefs* about what kinds of changes would drive improved results.

The way of working would:

- 1) Draw on growing scientific knowledge of adversity and of the approaches that can reduce stress on parents during foster care involvement and increase lifelong coping skills;
- 2) Convene frontline staff as problem-solvers and center the leadership and insights of child welfare-impacted parents in agency teams and project leadership;
- 3) Use a "networked improvement" model, successful in education and health care, that brings together organizations to work from a common improvement paradigm and test small improvements in different settings; and
- 4) Use data to measure and improve the effectiveness of new practices to gradually create a new approach to working with parents.

The substantive beliefs on which the changes would be based were derived from prior work done by the project partners, notably Rise's "Insights" paper [Power and Partnership](#) proposing new approaches to frontline practices with parents and the ["3 Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families"](#) produced by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. From these sources, the collaborative identified five "drivers" of improvement:

- **Safety:** The sudden loss of a child to foster care is an experience of grief, terror, disorientation, shame and loss of identity. Parents with past histories of victimization are especially likely to feel profoundly unsafe and to react by being frozen, enraged, or seeking to numb their pain. Providing parents with the information they need to know that their children are safe and addressing parents' own psychological safety is a first condition of parents' ability to plan and to nurture their children despite separation.
- **Significant relief from major stressors:** Parents often come to the attention of the child welfare system because of a pile-up of hardships and stress rooted in financial distress, and then may experience further loss of income because of child welfare involvement. They may lack sufficient food and adequate housing and face the pressure of unpaid bills. Relieving these sources of stress allows parents to develop the stability needed to focus on nurturing their children and making the changes they want in their own lives.
- **Relationships that support progress:** Positive changes happen in the context of supportive relationships. This is especially true when people need to make significant changes in how they cope with life stressors. They are likely to stumble, and when parents feel ashamed, discouraged, or even unworthy of regaining their

children, they need reminders that they matter. Relationship-building is a skill that can be nurtured in staff. Peer support also can be particularly powerful, both during and after a parent's involvement with the child welfare system.

- **Self-determination (Knowledge, Choice, Voice):** Parents know their families' needs better than anyone else, yet life histories of trauma as well as powerlessness in the face of multiple systems teach parents that their own actions are unlikely to impact their situation. When a child is removed, powerlessness and loss of control grows even stronger – at the very moment when parents most need to be able to take action. Parents can participate effectively in critical decision-making if they know more about the child welfare process, their rights and their options. Choices give parents a sense of control. Parents must be supported in building the knowledge and negotiating skills to exercise self-determination in planning for their families.
- **Supported opportunities to build and practice skills:** Quality services break down complex skills into small, manageable steps that parents can master incrementally. They offer opportunities to practice new approaches in low-risk settings, provide supportive feedback, and celebrate even minor accomplishments. They focus on building upon strengths rather than addressing deficits, and often include peer connection and expertise as a source of support.

The Evolution of the Collaborative's Approach

During the first phase of the collaborative, participants studied these drivers; learned about the work of those agencies that have been most successful in reunification and tried to identify commonalities in their approaches; and learned some basic quality improvement concepts, particularly the use of PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycles to test ideas quickly and generate proposed improvements.

Agencies then chose one or two initial projects apiece, all of which focused on strengthening the quality and frequency of contact between parents and parent advocates or “family coaches,” and providing information, including peer-written information from Rise. Some agencies had not, prior to the collaborative, created an information packet orienting parents to the child welfare system, the agency and their rights. Benefiting from the experience of collaborative partners who did have such materials, they were able to create their own. Five of the six agencies took steps to better connect with parents at the transition meeting, at which the parent meets with both ACS and the agency in which their child has just been placed. Their parent advocates or parent coaches began attending these meetings, providing the information packet and making a one-on-one time afterward to answer parents' initial questions. One agency also started making a call prior to the Transition Meeting to introduce the parent advocate to the parent, while another added peer materials to its newly-developed four-week orientation process. (As a note: Parent Advocates have lived experience of child welfare system involvement while Family Coaches do not but are hired to perform similar supportive functions, as well as do visit coaching, run programs including “Baby & Me” and “Parenting Journey,” etc. Instead of using both terms, we will use “parent advocate” for the remainder of this report, as it was advocates who largely held this work.)

These projects were important initial tests of ways to put the drivers into action. These new structures enabled parent advocates to meet with parents as soon as they entered the agency, and to provide stronger support and information up front, when parents are most in shock, traumatized and upset. Previously, only one agency had any formal structures to connect parents with support staff or informational resources at intake. In order to track and support improvement in delivery and impact of these practices, agencies individually began tracking action steps (for example, whether parent advocates were notified of a new placement in time to attend the transition meeting, and whether they succeeded in meeting with the parent and sharing information).

Nevertheless, collaborative members concluded that these activities alone, even if they could be successfully implemented, were likely to be insufficient to produce a real boost to reunification. Therefore, at the end of the first year, the collaborative decided to undertake a broader and more structured approach focusing on the work parent advocates could do with parents throughout the first 90 days after a child is removed from home. We agreed that working together on a common set of practices would accelerate learning. The practices that the collaborative chose to implement in year two drew heavily on previous work by Rise, notably the practices of educating parents through the [Visiting TIPS](#) and [Service Planning TIPS](#), along with brief training sessions Rise

provided to parents to help them deal with shame and loss, to learn negotiation skills and to prepare for decision-making conferences.

The 90-Day Practice Model

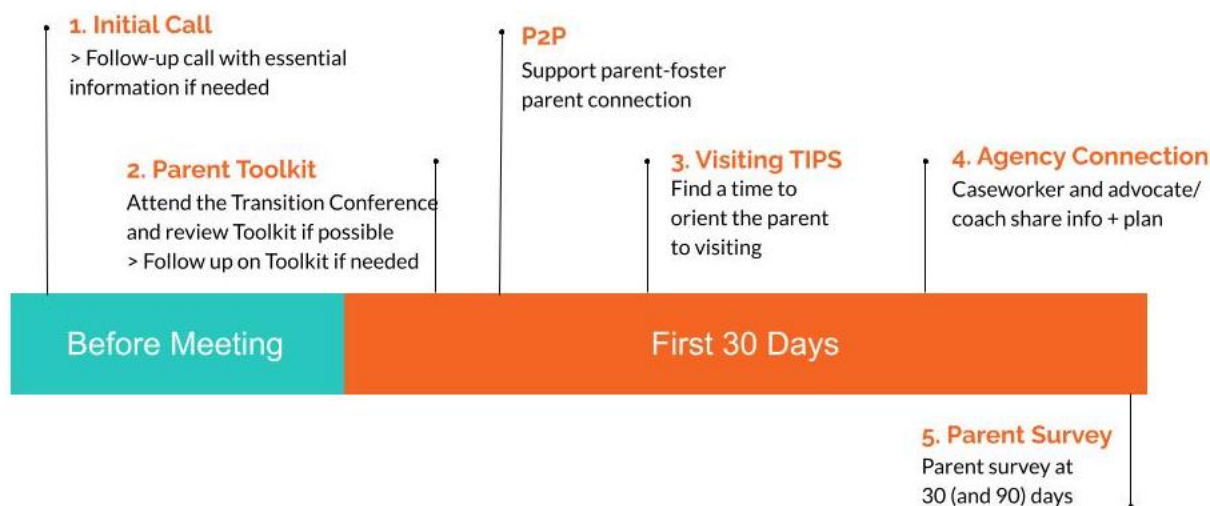
In the Collaborative's second year, all six agencies worked together to design and implement a common set of practices designed to provide critical information to parents at the beginning of the case and to create stronger points of contact and connection between parents and parent advocates so they can build a working relationship. While each practice is distinct, they are designed to build on one another and to support relationships in coalescing during the difficult and painful first weeks and months after children are removed from home.

We designed these practices around important case events – the transition conference, parent-to-parent meeting and family team conference – that are built into all cases but that are new and scary for parents. Parents need information and support to understand what these meetings are for and how they can approach them to get the results they want for their families.

We identified administrative practices the agencies needed to implement to make these practices possible. This was essential to the success of parent advocates' work but challenging for agencies to put in place and reinforce. We note some of those administrative actions below for each of the practices.

To support these practices, collaborative members developed a guide ("Tips for Connecting With Parents, p. 8) for communicating well with parents, which is applicable to all interactions.

Initial Orientation Practices (First 30 Days)



I. Initial Call: The parent advocate calls the parent as soon as the agency is notified of intake (or within 3 days) to offer support and ensure that the parent has basic information about their child.

- Introduces themselves, explains the parent advocate role, shares life experience of having their own children in foster care, and ask if the parent has any questions/needs
- Lets parent know they will meet at the Transition Conference and P2P; briefly explains what these are and how the parent can prepare for them; shares any other essential information, such as information about the child's placement.
- *Follow-up call:* If any essential information about the child or case wasn't available for the initial call, the advocate or caseworker calls to provide it as soon as it's available.
- *Administrative Checklist:* Agency accesses correct contact info for the parent; parent advocate is notified as soon as intake is made

2. Parent Toolkit: The parent advocate attends the transition meeting convened by ACS in order to meet and support the parent.

- Explains advocate/coach role and the difference between agency and ACS and emphasizes: “My role and the agency’s goal is to reunify families and to support you to get your children home.”
- Gives the parent a “toolkit,” consisting of a parent handbook orienting them to child welfare and the agency, along with Rise’s TIPS for parents and other materials, like a calendar, community resource list, or flyers about parent supports – and reviews it with them. This can be done at the end of the Transition Meeting if it seems possible based on the parent’s emotion and time, or as a separate follow-up.
- Explains any resources for parents in the agency, such as support group, Parenting Journey, Baby & Me, Visit Coaching and provides information about Rise’s Community Support Group
- *Administrative Checklist:* Agency creates a physical toolkit and online version that can be emailed/texted to parents and ensures access to the toolkit in all locations where it is needed, advocate is notified and able to attend

“When parents see the papers we give them, they think it’s another mandate from the agency, but then I talk to them and show them that I’m an advocate and here to help them with their rights and help their family reunify faster. At that point they are willing to listen.” – Parent advocate in a Reunification Collaboration agency

3. Visiting Orientation: Visiting after separation, in an agency office, is a unique and difficult situation. Rise’s Visiting TIPS offer information to parents about what’s expected in visits, how to get more visiting time (and what can set visiting back), coping with trauma in visits, setting routines and supporting children’s feelings during visits.

- The parent advocate offers to read through an article in [Rise’s Visiting TIPS](#) with the parent one-on-one to orient them to visiting, beginning with either “A Time to Bond” if a parent seems open to a discussion about creating a visit routine or coping emotionally with visits, or “Family Time TIPS” if a conversation focused on parents’ rights and how to get more visit time will be more engaging, or any article of a parent’s choice
- Emphasizes that the TIPS were written by and for real parents who reunified with their children from foster care in order to give parents the information they need to succeed
- Reviews the other main topics in Visiting TIPS, such as children’s needs in visits or coping with trauma in visits, and asks if anything connects with the parent, seeking to open up a conversation
- *Administrative Checklist:* Advocates/coaches are trained in Rise’s Visiting TIPS training, space is available for 20-30 minute meeting

“The TIPS have been so powerful for parents because it gives them the battery, the power, the charge, and the knowledge to say ‘I know now what I need to do!’” – Parent advocate in a Reunification Collaboration agency

(Note: Parent-to-Parent meetings to connect parents and foster parents were not part of our improvement focus, as they are a long-established practice that is supposed to happen routinely in all agency. However, we think they can be powerful if they are done well and facilitated by the parent advocate so we tracked these in our data.)

4. Agency Connection Meeting: Collaborative practices are centered in the parent advocate, but it’s crucial that advocates and caseworkers connect so they can plan together to support the parent and remove barriers in the case. This meeting is for the parent advocate and caseworker to check in to discuss their connections with the parent so far and plan next steps.

- Parent advocate / family coach and caseworker meet to debrief, share information and make a plan to further support the parent and family.
- *Administrative Checklist:* Supervisors ensure that these meetings happen and conclude with next-steps.

5. 30-Day Parent Survey: We selected what we believed were modest, achievable goals for the first 30 days, but that would represent significant improvements over prior ways of working that often leave parents feeling uninformed and uncared for. The survey asks parents to rate agreement with each statement below on a 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”:

- 1) I have the information I need about my child(ren)’s care.
- 2) I have the information I need about my own service plan.
- 3) (Agency) has treated me with respect.
- 4) There is someone at (Agency) who cares about me.
- 5) (Agency) wants me to succeed and be reunited with my child(ren).

Ongoing Support Practices (30-90 Days)



6. Standing Up to Shame / Survival Skills Training: The challenges that lead to a child being placed in foster care (for example, substance use) often reflect things parents do to survive their own trauma and the stresses they face every day. Reading the article “Standing Up to Shame” in Rise’s [Service Planning TIPS](#) can help parents acknowledge and move beyond shame about being system-involved. The article on “survival skills” is oriented toward parents’ need to make significant shifts in their approach to coping with stress, relationships, or parenting, and should ideally be discussed in a group, or can be used one-on-one if an advocate has begun to develop a relationship with a parent.

Parent advocates provide the parent with articles in Rise’s Service Planning TIPS and, one-on-one or in a group:

- Play “The Change Game” (from Rise’s Service Planning TIPS training)
- Read the Service Planning TIPS stories “Standing Up to Shame” and “From Survival Skills to Coping Skills”
- Ask parents what stands out to them and what they connect to, ideally in a group setting using restorative justice circlekeeping, a practice of facilitation and relationship-building that advocates can be trained in
- Share the idea that the Service Plan is intended to support a shift from Survival to Coping Skills, and ask for parents’ perspective on their real needs
- Check in on basic needs and any self-advocacy they may want to do to connect their service plan to their actual needs

“Being able to share the Rise TIPS and tools with parents has been powerful and beneficial to the parents that choose to utilize them. Not only do they help parents with self-advocating for themselves in the here and now, but also in the ‘after this’ phase.” – Parent advocate in a Reunification Collaboration agency

7. Negotiation Skills Training: This training supports parents in approaching any negotiation—with a caseworker, their attorney, or in a Family Team Conference (FTC)—with a goal, strategy, coping skills for managing emotion, and a plan for needed support. One-on-one or in a group:

- Read aloud together and discuss key take-aways from the Service Planning TIPS story “How to Negotiate”
- Work with parent to identify and write down their goals for an upcoming negotiation
- Ask parent to consider other strategies they can use, like bringing a friend or practicing in advance
- Identify how, as an advocate or coach, you can help
- Read “How to Self-Advocate” to close

8. Preparing for a Family Team Conference: These case reviews and decision-making meetings held every 90 days do not include parents’ attorneys and sometimes go ahead without the parent. These can be effective spaces for advancing a case if parents have support. Advocates meet one-on-one to explain what an FTC is for and make a negotiation plan:

- Review a parent’s goals developed in the negotiation skills training
- Ensure that a parent has supportive people coming, if possible, including someone from their legal team
- Ask how you can support the parent
- Optional: Read out “Words to Help You Regain Balance”
- Read “Planning for Health and Hope” and discuss, asking about basic needs, if it seems helpful

9. Agency Connection Meeting: Hold a second “agency connection meetings” between parent advocate and caseworker shortly before day 90 when the family team conference occurs.

10. 90-Day Parent Survey: We selected these items to reflect the possibility of more significant relationship-building and information provision over 90 days. The survey asks parents to rate agreement with each statement below on a 5-point scale:

1. I felt prepared for the Family Team Conference.
2. My service plan responds to my needs, not just what others think I should do.
3. I have the resources and support to cope with the stress I'm under.
4. I'm able to negotiate to get what I need.
5. There is someone at (Agency) who cares about me and wants me to succeed.
6. I believe that I can succeed and be reunited with my child(ren).

“Using the 90-day model to work with parents has allowed opportunities for more engagement at different times throughout the family's case, which is always important. Parents appreciate the extra, direct support.” – Parent advocate in a Reunification Collaboration agency

Data Collection

In order to understand how well these new practices are implemented and whether they make a difference, the collaborative decided to collect three kinds of data: (1) the date on which each practice is completed for each

parent; (2) a rating by the parent advocate or family coach of the tone (“positivity”) of each such interaction; and (3) feedback from parents at 30 and 90 days after placement.

The challenge was to do this in ways that would minimize the burden of data entry while still providing useful information for parent advocates, their supervisors, and agency managers. Collaborative members believe that, with the assistance of an independent contractor who developed the data platform, they largely succeeded in accomplishing these goals. Parent advocates and family coaches report that data entry, done through a JotForm (similar to Google forms), is fast and easy to navigate. Each agency has web access at any time to its own data, including a detail of all data entered for each case, useful for supervisory discussions; a weekly report flagging cases about to hit the 30 and 90 day marks, and identifying potential data entry errors for review; and a monthly report displaying the rate at which the various practices have been carried out. Rise and CSSP have access to all data without being able to identify any individual parent.

The collaborative developed additional tools for the other kinds of data. For the “positivity of contact” rating, there is a simple rubric on a five-point scale, used to rate each interaction. For parent feedback, there are surveys with five questions at 30 days and six questions at 90 days, each of which takes approximately one minute to complete.

Positivity of Contact Rubric

On a score of 1-5, from Very Negative to Very Positive, how would you characterize your overall interaction?				
1-Very Negative	1-Somewhat Negative	3-Neutral	4-Somewhat Positive	5-Very Positive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rejects offer to talk or meet Curses you out, and you're unable to repair Hangs up or walks out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listens without response, or cuts you off Defensive body language: Crouched over, crossed arms, little eye contact Hostile body language: Looming over, loud voice, clenched Throws away a resource you offer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listens without much response, but not defensive or hostile Complains about things unrelated to the topic (can be seen as a form of seeking help) Returns calls Looks over materials you provide and takes them with him/her 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Warmer body language: Relaxed posture, eye contact, faces you Asks questions Raises concerns Refers to materials you provided Seems happy to hear from you or see you Replies with interest Shares something about his/her experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks you out Smiles or jokes Confirms upcoming meetings, appointment, visits Acts on guidance in materials you provide Asks for your feedback Asks for strategic guidance Asks you to join meetings, appointments, etc.

Data Entry Form (first page) and one section of the data readout:

All data entered into the google form:

Case Number..	Parent's First Name	Advocate/ Coach Email	Hits 30 Days On	Hits 90 Days On	Practice	Date	Positivity..	Click link to edit	Timestamp	Initial Call Notes?
3		sharrison@..	3/6/2021	5/5/2021	1. Initial Call	5/5/2021	3	https://www.jo..	5/6/2021 8:..	Yes, hove..
9		mfavale@ri..	1/1/2021	3/2/2021	1. Initial Call	3/8/2021	3	https://www.jo..	4/19/2021 1..	No
					2. Toolkit Review	3/26/2021	3	https://www.jo..	4/19/2021 1..	No
					3. Visiting TIIPS ..	3/26/2021	3	https://www.jo..	4/19/2021 1..	No
					5. Summary - 30 ..	3/31/2021	Null	https://www.jo..	4/19/2021 1..	No
		Mmarshall..	Null	Null	4. Parent Survey..	Null	Null	https://www.jo..	4/21/2021 7..	No
					5. Summary - 30 ..	3/5/2021	Null	https://www.jo..	4/22/2021 1..	No
29		mfavale@ri..	Null	Null	2. Toolkit Review	9/15/2020	5	https://www.jo..	11/16/2020 ..	No
					3. Visiting TIIPS ..	9/15/2020	5	https://www.jo..	11/16/2020 ..	No
		jfordjour@r..	Null	Null	2. Toolkit Review	9/11/2020	5	https://www.jo..	11/30/2020 ..	No
					3. Visiting TIIPS ..	9/15/2020	5	https://www.jo..	11/30/2020 ..	No
					4. Parent Survey..	Null	Null	https://www.jo..	11/30/2020 ..	No
179		Teresa.mar..	10/3/2020	12/2/2020	1. Initial Call	12/10/2020	5	https://www.jo..	12/10/2020 ..	No
289		agonzalez2..	1/7/2021	3/8/2021	1. Initial Call	12/29/2020	4	https://www.jo..	1/14/2021 9..	Yes, hove..

Tips for Connecting with Parents

Prepare yourself:

- Recognize your role and power
- Focus on not taking anything personal
- Don't be quick to respond
- Adjust energy as needed, up or down
- Humanize the experience
- Give power to parents
- Check on a person, not a case

Body language

- Smile
- Adjust the tone and energy of your voice (energetic or calm)
- Make eye contact

Logistics:

- Choose a location and space to talk
- Offer a snack or drink sincerely
- Sit next to parents, not behind a desk or across a table

In the Conversation:

- Ask if this is a good time to talk and get started
- Check-in ask how parents are doing to get feel of where parent is
- Ask parents about themselves – their interests, hopes, what they're feeling good about – before moving on to discussion related to "the case"
- Validate parents' feelings

Keeping in mind:

- Just sit with and listen
- Show you care and be intentional
- Know when to back up and give space
- Listen to feelings and reasoning - don't just focus on case work
- Offer invites, not mandates
- Meet basic needs if you can

Results and Challenges

The project as a whole has been successful in developing a specific, replicable set of practices to be used by parent advocates in the first 90 days of working with a parent, supported by credible materials developed by parents with experience in the child welfare system. It was also successful in building the administrative functions needed for advocates to support and inform parents from the time children enter foster care. The project was also challenging under the conditions of the pandemic, and especially for small agency teams as it required broad support.

Results:

- *Development of a clear Parent Advocate role* in informing and supporting parents early in the case. This collaboration has reflected the importance and value of having a parent advocate with lived experience – a genuine support from someone who understands the process of child welfare and how to navigate through it. All agencies had been using advocates in an ad-hoc manner, often covering visits for caseworkers; coming into the case very late when termination loomed; or primarily supporting parents at trial discharge. While useful, these roles kept Advocates from being available to support parents during the time of greatest pain and crisis, and concentrated Advocate support toward the most successful parents. The Collaborative agencies developed a vision for the work largely based on practices described in Rise’s Insights paper, putting in the work to bring these to life.
- *Extensive testing of new practices.* While the practices are just beginning to become routine for agency teams, as they were operating under COVID with staffing stresses and reduced placements, our database shows that 93 families, across the six agencies, had at least the initial call; 55 had the toolkit review; 34 had the visiting TIPS review; and smaller numbers had the remaining practices. A dozen of each of the surveys (30-day and 90-day) were returned. There were 17 parents who received at least four of the practices above.
- *Agencies positioned to participate effectively in new initiative:* At the beginning of the collaborative’s second year, ACS secured private funding to launch a new Parents Supporting Parents (PSP) initiative, which enabled two agencies in the collaborative, Graham and Rising Ground, to hire a combined 9 new parent advocates, each assigned to a casework unit. In addition, ACS released a new 10-year foster care RFP that calls for 150 new parent advocate hires citywide (one in every unit) to be trained by Rise, with the 90-day practices incorporated into casework citywide. The collaborative agencies are considerably better positioned to incorporate advocates into case planning and frontline work with parents because of their experience over the past two years, as they have developed administrative, supervisory, staffing and data structures to do the work.
- *Cross-agency learning:* Agencies were able to learn from one another and highly valued cross-agency support. Most frontline staff and others below leadership have no opportunity to learn from their peers. As an example, Rising Ground developed a stand-alone family support team modeled on Graham’s Family Success unit based on collaboration.

Challenges:

- *COVID:* COVID had an enormous impact on this project. Successful connections between parent advocates and parents have usually been built as advocates take parents aside informally and in-person, and this became impossible under COVID. Working from home, trying to connect with parents by Zoom or phone or text messages, was the only option available throughout most of the past year. At the same time, agency teams were under significant personal and work stresses during the pandemic. Foster care intake declined, so parent advocates had fewer new parents to try out these practices with. Moreover, parents already in the agencies faced major new stressors, and agencies quite reasonably needed to devote more of the parent advocates’ time to helping with those.

“COVID has made implementation harder because of no face-to-face time with parents.” – Parent advocate in a Reunification Collaboration agency

- *Understaffing and the difficulty of implementing small projects in large agencies:* While all six agencies continued participating throughout the collaborative, several struggled to maintain the level of involvement needed to implement challenging new practices. Their teams were reduced to just 2-3 staff; they experienced staff turnover and when the project champion left, whether that was a parent advocate or senior staff member, the work was set back substantially; and they were unable, among shifting and high demands, to consistently attend to this project. Despite these challenges, all agencies continued to participate actively in the collaborative’s monthly meetings.
- *Need for closer integration with casework:* While many of these practices don’t require caseworker support, they are designed to complement casework and caseworkers’ relationships with parents. They require that basic information about new cases be shared immediately with parent advocates, and this was an administrative challenge for most agencies. Parent advocates are often supervised and working in a separate unit from caseworkers – useful for supervision and for protecting the integrity of their role, but leading to difficulties in connecting with caseworkers and forming an effective team working with each parent.
- *The absence of prior NYC models for what parent advocates do and standards for quality:* The Collaborative turned out to be doing something more ambitious than planned -- redefine the parent advocate role in New York City foster care agencies and invent guidance on how to do it well. While NYC has long had structures such as Transition Conferences, agency-based visits and Family Team Conferences, and has also long employed Parent Advocates to assist parents in reunifying, no model existed to ensure that Advocates are able to amplify parents’ success as they navigate foster care agency structures and milestones. Within NYC’s decentralized system that includes more than two dozen agencies, the Collaborative was able to create a set of flexible practices that offer meaningful roles for Parent Advocate support of parents across multiple agency structures and cultures. Rise’s Co-Director, Jeanette Vega, who worked as a parent advocate at an agency for 3 years, met regularly throughout the Collaborative to coach, support, problem-solve with parent advocates on the project and to ensure that they were heard within their agencies and in our planning.

“As advocates trying to implement a new practice at agencies, it has been difficult. Shifting the way agencies practice has been the hard part.” – Parent advocate in a Reunification Collaboration agency

- *Learning from failure.* It was challenging for agencies to implement a new practice in a pilot, fail at the practice, regroup as a team to discuss what went well and what did not, and then make adjustments and try again. Especially in the context of COVID, teams might not even have regularly scheduled meeting times. More broadly, though, agencies are not used to creating best practices. More typically, their work is to implement existing models to fidelity.
- *Initiative design.* Rise and CSSP designed the collaborative in a way that asked a great deal of agencies. They were expected to bring together new teams that would use a new way of working to develop new practices. In retrospect, the project might have been better positioned for success if we had either lowered the ask or raised the level of support, a conflict we struggled with throughout. More modest expectations might, for example, have led us to begin with some preparatory steps like training staff on effective approaches to the persistent outreach needed to engage many parents, and supporting that implementation, before moving on to learning about and using an existing Rise tool like the visiting TIPS. Or we might have provided greater support in the form of more extensive technical assistance on improvement cycles, led by someone with experience doing similar work in other settings. Scaling up

support or scaling down expectations likely would have helped us cope better with predictable operational challenges like turnover, difficulty in hiring parent advocates, and difficulty getting teams together on a regular basis, although not the extreme challenges presented by COVID.

“It was hard to understand the 90-day model implementation, as this is a brand new practice.”
– Parent advocate in a Reunification Collaboration agency

Recommendations

The collaborative’s work over the past two years has provided an opportunity for us to learn about what it will take to achieve more reunifications more quickly in New York City’s foster care system, and about the particular opportunities and challenges associated with the role of parent advocates. What we’ve learned leads us to three recommendations to ACS and foster care providers.

1. Better define the advocate’s role. Parent advocates do a wide variety of tasks, many of them related to an agency’s immediate needs (staff a visit, help deal with a crisis, reach out to a parent whom the agency has had difficulty engaging). They may interact with many parents as they do these tasks, but not spend enough time with most of those parents to be able to build a relationship with them. And, even when there is a supervisor who understands the value parent advocates bring, it’s difficult to help them build skills when there is little consistency in their day-to-day work and little guidance about what to look for to see that the work is being done well.

The collaborative created an alternative approach, one in which a parent advocate’s role is focused on specific parents (at the time their children enter foster care) and they are expected to use a defined set of practices in engaging with those parents. The practices are both valuable in themselves and a vehicle for building the relationships needed to help people change. Because of the challenges associated with COVID, noted earlier in this paper, none of the agencies involved with the collaborative fully established this role; parent advocates remained responsible for other work with other families in addition to trying out the practices we developed for the first 90 days. Nevertheless, collaborative members came away from our work convinced that there is real value in clearer expectations about what parent advocates will do and with whom.

The specific practices we took up are of course not the only possible way to do this. For example, we could imagine a parallel set of practices being used by advocates when they are assigned, as is the case in some agencies, to families where reunification is expected soon. But we think it likely that the value of advocates’ work will be greatest early on, because a parent’s early experience with a child welfare agency sets a direction that is difficult to change later.

2. Develop broader teams with responsibility for success. It’s remarkable that the six agencies taking part in the collaborative were able to continue to commit to this project, given the crisis created by COVID and the switch from in-person to on-line connections that lasted more than a year. But those challenges also meant that it was harder to keep the collaborative connected to the rest of an agency’s work, both at the leadership level (this was a small project for agencies dealing with large problems every day) and on the front line (where, for example, a parent advocate could not walk down the hall and talk with the caseworker). While the notion of a team from each agency participating in the project remained alive throughout, in practice those teams were smaller and more limited (largely, to a manager or supervisor and one or more parent advocates) than we had imagined.

If we were establishing a collaborative like this in the future, our opening questions to leaders in agencies interested in participating would be questions like: What do you believe is standing in the way of achieving more reunification more rapidly, and what is your agency’s plan to overcome those obstacles? How does this specific project relate to the rest of your plan? What is the team needed to carry out that plan? How will you know what

resources they need, and how will you know whether they are succeeding? We imagine that, to be well-positioned for success, a team needs a strong champion in senior leadership, ongoing management involvement, real connections between caseworkers and parent advocates, and a strong data platform. Some but not all of those elements were in place for this collaborative, and we encourage ACS and child welfare agencies to examine all of them as they initiate future efforts to improve reunification.

3. Identify and attend to administrative needs early on. Based on the work of the collaborative, we are now much better able to predict the administrative challenges that agencies will face as they implement ACS's PSP initiative. They include the following:

- Developing the toolkit that will be provided to parents at intake, along with other supporting materials
- Developing internal procedures to ensure that parent advocates get timely information – for example, about when a transition conference will be held (and advocating with ACS if the agency does not receive this information timely)
- Creating a routine process for bringing parent advocates and caseworkers together to collaborate
- Making available space for the casual interactions between parent advocates and parents needed to build relationships
- Making available group meeting space
- Engaging parent advocates and their supervisors in identifying what good practice looks like, and building the supportive supervisory relationships needed to foster good practice
- Dedicating sufficient time from staff with data and CQI expertise to ensure that advocates, supervisors, and managers have the information they need to do their jobs
- Ensuring that there is a point person who is dedicated to this work and empowered to problem-solve as new challenges inevitably emerge

The 90-day practice model described here has now been integrated into agency and parent advocate training in the pilot Parents Supporting Parents (PSP) program at two agencies, Graham and Rising Ground, who have hired 9 parent advocates through private funding for this initiative. Through PSP, the 90-day model practices are continuing to be developed and tracked, using the Collaborative data platform, and with the support of Rise and ACS staff. In July 2022, new city contracts with foster care agencies will begin and include parent advocate roles and the expectation that advocates will be trained and supported in using these practices. We hope this detailed report on the Collaborative process and outcomes—and our recommendations for continued implementation—are helpful as these practices become integrated into casework and parent advocate roles citywide.

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224 W. 30th St. #804 | New York, NY 10001
www.risemagazine.org