



## What to Look for in a Parent Partner Coordinator Musings from a Coordinator

Parent Partner Coordinators play a vital role in the success of a Parent Partner Program. These staff members are responsible for developing, implementing, and overseeing peer-to-peer family involvement activities. They recruit, train, supervise, and support the Parent Partners—family members previously in the child welfare system now serving as peer mentors to families new to the system. In many respects, Coordinators serve as mentors to the mentors. They also serve as intermediaries between Parent Partners and the child welfare agency (administrators and caseworkers), ensuring that each group understands the role and perspectives of the others and troubleshooting any problems as they arise. Further, they engage in outreach efforts, making presentations about the importance of family involvement and advocating for family members.

As part of the Children’s Bureau’s *Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative*,<sup>1</sup> the Contra Costa County, California, grant community implemented a ground-breaking Parent Partner Program.<sup>2</sup> Based on her experience developing and overseeing a successful Parent Partner Program within the Contra Costa County child welfare system, Judi Knittel shares the following insight on what to look for in a Parent Partner Coordinator and tips that contribute to the Coordinator’s success.<sup>3</sup>

### Recommended Characteristics for a Parent Partner Coordinator

Look for candidates who have the following characteristics:

- **Experience with the child welfare system (first-hand experience a plus).** I brought with me 25 years of working at the private agency, county, and State level...I knew child welfare and was comfortable interfacing with other professionals, but I also had adopted a child who had spent pretty much her whole life in the system. That experience gave me a personal perspective on foster care, the child welfare system, and the way people are made to feel disempowered...That first-hand experience gives one a sense of what it is like “on the other side of the desk.”

1 In 2003, the Children’s Bureau funded nine demonstration grants to test the efficacy of a principle-guided system of care approach to improving outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system. For more information, visit [www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/index.cfm).

2 For more information on Contra Costa’s Parent Partner Program, see Appendix F of the *Family Involvement in Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care Initiative*, [www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement\\_Appendix.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Appendix.pdf).

3 Judi Knittel is the supervisor of the Contra Costa County Family Engagement Unit. Over the past 8 years she has coordinated the Parent Partner Program by researching, developing, implementing, and refining the model. She also provides training and direct supervision to the Parent Partner staff, which consists of four full-time Parent Partners. Originally from New York State, Ms. Knittel has more than 30 years of experience in the social work field. She is the 2010 recipient of the “People Who Make a Difference” award, which was given to her by the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors and the Alcohol and Other Drugs Advisory Board.

- **Confidence.** You need someone who is confident in what they know, not someone who is intimidated by the naysayers. There will be a lot of people who will tell you why the [Parent Partner] model cannot possibly work. You need someone with the right instincts, who knows that it can work, and knows how to frame it for the child welfare world.
- **Problem-solving skills and steadfastness when things go wrong.** You need someone who has maturity, [whose] world will not get rocked every time something goes wrong. Of course, things will go wrong. A Parent Partner will unintentionally offend somebody, or relapse, or not follow a policy. The Coordinator may have to do damage control, confront, apologize, laugh, or whatever to address the problem...and then move on.
- **Creativity.** The Coordinator needs to be creative and flexible. It is important [that the Program has] a vision and a mission statement to give us the shared values, but the Coordinator will need to think outside the box. Some of it, we make up as we go along, some of it is responding to a new challenge while adhering to those core values, some of it is looking for ways to be helpful.
- **Positive “can do” attitude.** There are really two approaches to program development—one is to look for all the things that could go wrong as a reason to maintain the status quo and the other is to ask the question, “how do we make this happen?” The successful Parent Partner Coordinator will ask the latter question.
- **Make the program as easy as possible for caseworkers to integrate.** [After] 25 years in child welfare, one thing I knew for sure was that social workers [are concerned with] having too much paperwork. So I made the decision early on that there would be no paperwork required from social workers, no referrals, no forms to fill out. I do all the paperwork for everybody... [The social workers] are just too busy... So we make it easy for them, and they like the consideration.
- **Leverage each person’s expertise.** When dealing with Parent Partners, it is important not to set yourself up as the authority about everything. To be sure, I know a lot about child welfare, but I may not know a lot about what happens in a treatment program, or what addiction is like, or how people are treated in jail. The strength of the program is that I am an expert in child welfare and the Parent Partners are experts about their own lives, communities, and experiences. The merging of these two worlds makes us effective, powerful, and relevant.
- **Be clear on how you can measure success.** If success is our ability to change somebody or get a specific outcome for our families, then success will seldom be achieved. We can’t make anybody do anything. So our goals have to be more achievable and within our control. We measure success in terms of ‘did we make this parent an informed consumer?’:
  - Do they know how the system works?
  - Do they know what is going to be required of them?
  - Do they know what happens if they follow the case plan and what happens if they do not?
  - Has the parent been treated fairly and with respect?

## Tips for Success

The following strategies can help the Parent Partner Coordinator create a successful working environment:

If we can answer ‘yes’ to these questions, then we have done our job.

- Use experience and insight to find ways to make the child welfare system better. I would encourage any Coordinator to take a look at the system with a lot of questions and an eye to how things can be improved. For example: How can we be more family friendly? How can we help parents have a greater voice in their case plan? How can we help fathers not feel marginalized? How can we work with social workers without giving them the impression that we are going to second guess them or try to take power away from them? How can we truly empower families?

A Parent Partner Coordinator with the right experience, confidence, and outlook—coupled with appropriate expectations and strategies—can provide leadership and support to a Parent Partner Program and, in turn, set the stage for meaningful engagement of families in the child welfare system.