

Developing a Parent Partner Program

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Sandy Lint, Iowa Department of Human Services; Sarah Persons, Children and Families of Iowa; Jaime Reinburn, Parent Partner

Female Speaker [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends, and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

Tom Oates [00:00:32]: Today on the show, working with parents to help parents. Hi, everyone. Tom Oates from Child Welfare Information Gateway here, and today we're diving deep into developing and sustaining Parent Partner Programs.

Now you may be familiar with Parent Partner Programs, but if not, these bring parents involved in the child welfare system together with parents who've been there before, worked to complete their case plan, and successfully reunified with their families. Parent partners work with agencies and communities. They actually help in policy development and training. They provide mentorship, guidance, advice, and support. They are a living, breathing resource of what success looks like to those working to strengthen families and for those parents working to reunite with their children.

Parent Partner Programs are being implemented by a number of agencies and organizations across the country, but how do you get one started? And how do you keep it going or even expand the program to reach more families? Well, today, we try to answer those questions, so we sat down with a few folks from the state of Iowa who've been able to do just that.

Iowa's Parent Partner Program has grown during the past few years and become an example for others across the nation. You're gonna hear from Sandy Lint. She is with the Iowa Department of Human Services, and she serves as the state coordinator for community partnerships, and she's also the program manager for the state's Parent Partner Approach. Also in the conversation is Sarah Persons, and she is with Children and Families of Iowa. Now they're the organization that runs the contract for Iowa's Parent Partner Program. Sarah is the state coordinator for the program. She's also a master trainer for the Parent Partner Training, and she's been overseeing Parent Partner Programs since 2008, but not only are we joined by the professionals from the agencies and organizations that operate the program, but I'm really glad that we're able to also talk with Jamie Reinburn. She's one of the programs Parent Partners and a trainer for new Parent Partners. So we talk about standing up a program, getting buy-in, both figuratively and literally — 'cause the funding has to come from somewhere — what the Iowa program entails, and what it takes to be a successful Parent Partner.

Once we're done, I'll talk about some resources to help you learn a little more, and as a reminder, you can always connect to information, reports, tools, and tips covering the entire continuum of child welfare at childwelfare.gov, so pay attention here because there's a lot of great information and anecdotal experience that can help you and those you work with develop and grow a Parent Partner Program. So here we go with Sandy Lint, Sarah Persons, and Jamie Reinburn.

Sandy Lint, let start with you. So where did the impetuuous to develop a Parent Partner Program come from?

Sandy Lint [00:03:18]: Well, for several years, we had been working on a community organizing strategy. We called it Community Partnership for Protecting Children, and we are continually trying to recruit parents to provide a voice at that table. We didn't have much luck primarily because there wasn't a structure in place to support those parents. They might come once or twice, and then we wouldn't see them again.

We went to a conference. There was a community partnership team here in the State of Iowa that went to a conference in Arizona, and our director of child welfare was with us, and we heard a Parent Partner from Kentucky. There were a few original sites that the Family to Family Initiative had promoted the Parent Partner Program, and we heard this woman named Angela, and our whole team was very inspired by her story and by the work that she did. And the team — it was one of those conferences where you're supposed to determine what you do when you leave this conference, and that team said, "We are gonna have a Parent Partner Program," and fortunately, our leader was right there alongside listening to everybody's adamantly requesting this program be implemented in Iowa.

When we got back, the director said to me, "If you can get half the leadership" — which that level of leadership, there were eight individuals in the state — "to agree, we can bring Angela and the trainers that worked in Kentucky to come and speak to the folks in Iowa," and that was Randy Jenkins and Sandra Alamenex and Angela. It took some doing. We got two yeses and a couple maybes, so that was nod to bring them into the state. And we strategically had Sandra and Angela tell their story to different groups. We had a conference call with a lot of supervisors, and they spent a day just talking it up. Then we took a team, and we sent a team of ten down to Kentucky to one of their gatherings, and that was very, very helpful to getting people on board, but it took about a year from the time that we went to the conference, the time that we brought the national trainers into the state.

Tom Oates [00:05:41]: So with that, what was it that got those folks at that senior level to at least give you a maybe, if not give you a yes? What were the convincing value points that you had to get across to that leadership?

Sandy Lint [00:05:54]: Really the parent's story really turned the corner. You know, the backlash I was getting when I talked to folks was "Is this gonna be another person involved in our case?" In other words, workers have CASA, county attorney. They have to speak to this citizen review, foster care review panels, and so the big concern was is this someone gonna come in and, again, someone that the workers would have to, for a lack of a better word, manage. They have a lot of people involved in these cases. Is this another person?

When they heard the parent's stories and the parents were really grateful for their intervention with the state department, it was a surprise to folks 'cause we don't hear that. Our workers don't hear that. Our leadership doesn't hear that. And they never saw parents again after they were in the system unless they were coming back in the door. So the parent's story really had a lot of influence on the leadership buy-in.

Tom Oates [00:07:07]: So when you started this — first off, like any program, someone's gonna ask you the ultimate question of, "Okay, how do we fund this?"

Sandy Lint [00:07:14]: Right.

Tom Oates [00:07:14]: Where did you grab the funding from? And then to get that funding, I'm sure, there's gotta be the talk of, "All right, so what are your objectives? What will your outcomes be?" So to get the funding, A, how'd you get it? And two — or B, rather, what were your intended objectives that you put out there to secure the funding?

Sandy Lint [00:07:34]: Well, that's a good question because we really did it on a shoestring, and the state didn't put a lot of money towards this. Within the community partnership budget, I had enough money to bring in national consultants and do some training. We put an application process out and said, "We will provide the technical assistance and training if the local sites would put up a minimum of \$50,000," and that would buy a part-time coordinator and mentoring services just to start the party. And that's what we did. We had 4 areas that covered about 11 counties, and we gave them a small stipend and asked them to come into town once a month and help us shape the policies and procedures from what they were learning. I was — it was, as I say, building a plane as we were flying, and we had no vision of long-term funding strategies. It was strictly pilot — we're fortunate here in Iowa that there are some local child welfare dollars that are allocated locally and community partnership allocates money locally. So local sites used those two fundings. They used local grants from United Way, just patch-worked pieces together to come up with dollars.

Tom Oates [00:09:01]: And so what were the initial objectives?

Sandy Lint [00:09:03]: Initial objectives, we wanted a strategy that we could support parent's voice at the table; that we could learn from parents, and we wanted a structure in order to do that. We also wanted a new engagement strategy with families, and we really thought the best way was for families to connect with these wonderful parents that were telling their stories. So we — you know, we sought out DHS workers who would make referrals to families that they had worked with and thought that, you know, they were in solid recovery.

A lot of 'em were — come to the attention of the department because of substance abuse, so we got recommendations from the workers. That also helped the worker buy-in. That's usually where they got their first referrals. But the objective was really about getting the parent's voice at the table and really coming up with new strategies on engaging families in a more meaningful way.

We also were mindful of the protective factors and the federal outcomes around re-abuse and length of stay and permanency goals. Those were there, but I'm not so sure in the initial stages we were promoting those as much as just getting the parent's voice.

Tom Oates [00:10:22]: All right, so Sarah, let me turn to you here, and walk me through just the basics of the program. How — what's the structure? How do you actually operate this thing?

Sara Persons [00:10:30]: Well, we went into a state structure in July, 2013, and what our structure looks like for our employees at CFI, we have a state coordinator. That's me. We have five service area coordinators. Our state is — it's broke into five DHS, Department of Human Services, service areas, so we have one supervisor that oversees, you know, a — somewhere between 10 counties and 30 counties. And then under them there are local coordinators, and they oversee the Parent Partners and

those local areas, and they typically oversee somewhere between, you know, 3 to 5 counties in that area.

Tom Oates [00:11:16]: And so how many people are involved? At least — well, from the beginning level to where you are now, you know, what kind of staff involvement are — is the commitment here?

Sara Persons [00:11:25]: Well, we have over 150 Parent Partners that are mentoring across the state of Iowa. We have 18 local coordinators, 5 service area coordinators, and myself.

Tom Oates [00:11:38]: Okay. So when it comes to not only the parents you are helping but the parents who are now Parent Partners, what's the ratio in terms of how many parents can you actually look at and say, "Yeah, Parent Partners will help these parents or these families, and I wanna, you know, partner them up with, you know, these veteran parents," so to speak. So what's the ratio in terms of how many Parent Partners you have on staff and how many parents you can actually help with the program?

Sara Persons [00:12:05]: Well, each Parent Partner can mentor up to 15 individuals, so that's — I mean, that's the max amount we want them to be mentoring. Each coordinator can oversee 15, up to 15 Parent Partners, so — and then the number that are being mentored, each coordinator can mentor — or can oversee up to 225 parents per local coordinator in their cluster site.

Tom Oates [00:12:36]: And so when you mention mentoring, you know, what are we really asking those Parent Partners to do? What's kind of in their scope that they can — you know, that they can use those skills and those talents and those experiences to help those parents?

Sara Persons [00:12:49]: The biggest thing they do is walk through the child welfare system, the court process, the family team meetings, those types of things, and I know Jamie will talk more about that and kind of what she does on a day-to-day basis during her part of the interview, but that's the biggest thing that they do. They just — you know, they're there. If they're having an issue, they have a question, they can call them and help find a service or help be re-directed or directed to where they need to be going.

Tom Oates [00:13:20]: Did you guys find that that was one of the key objectives that you wanted to get across in terms of just helping those parents understand the system because there are so many steps and so many offices that they need to kinda navigate, all while, you know, dealing with the rest of their lives and their own either jobs or, you know, education or treatment programs?

Sara Persons [00:13:39]: Yeah. You know, I think it's one of the scariest things, you know a parent would go through, and Jamie does a great job of talking about that, but, you know, when you're down and out, and then your kids get removed, then what? You know, and you're scared, and to have somebody say, "I've been there, and I've done that, and I'm gonna walk through this process with you" is — it's huge, and it makes you — you know, the parent feel like, "Somebody's on my side."

Tom Oates [00:14:09]: Are there certain parameters or requirements that you're asking not of the Parent Partners — and we can ask Jamie a little bit more about, you know, what it takes to be an effective Parent Partner, but for the parents you're looking to help, do they need to be in some sort of scenario, or what makes you say, "This is a parent that could use some help"?

Sara Persons [00:14:28]: Well, our referrals come from the Department of Human Services, and our target population right now would be those families where the child has been removed from the home, or there's some sort of supervision requirement of the parent, like grandma or grandpa needs to move in to provide supervision because the — for whatever the reason, the situation's not safe for the child.

Tom Oates [00:14:55]: All right, Jamie. Let me now turn this to you here. So we talk about — with Sarah about what they're looking for in terms of the role of the Parent Partner. How did they approach you about this? How did they bring this up to you and suggest that you could help?

Jaime Reinburn [00:15:11]: My case worker for the Department of Human Services brought the program — the attention to me, explained a little bit about the program, thought that I would be an asset and benefit the program, so, you know, it — I thought it was a way for me to give back.

Tom Oates [00:15:28]: When you saw that, what was the first thing, though, that came through your mind when they said that, "Hey, we've got this new program, and you'd be great for it"?

Jaime Reinburn [00:15:36]: I was honored, honestly, to be — to have them think that I'd be an asset to the program, considering when I came into the eyes of the Department of Human Service, I was so broken and so beat down that I didn't think I had any value to myself, let alone my children or anyone else.

Tom Oates [00:15:51]: So now that they instituted this and they rope you in, talk to me about training, 'cause now you're in a different position within the child welfare system. What were the key things that they made sure that you had to have those, like, either skills or techniques to help other families?

Jaime Reinburn [00:16:07]: Well, like, for me, I think the biggest thing is you have to have compassion and passion for working with people. You have to have the outlook of the Department of Human services that they're there to help so that we can then encourage our families not only to engage with services but to look at their case worker as a support instead of someone who's there just to make their life harder.

And so we go through all kinds of trainings. DHS 101. We go through building a better future, where we sit at the table with Department of Human Service workers, you know, and we tell our stories, and, you know, we go through — like, we just did training, like, for human trafficking, and there's domestic violence, you know, because not everyone comes into the eyes of the department for the same reason. It's a vast array of reasons why children are removed, and so just because, like, mine was substance abuse, me having an understanding of the system, the court system, what the family's feeling with the removal doesn't matter why their children with removed. I can still relate to 'em.

Tom Oates [00:17:10]: Mm-hmm. So what is that interaction that you have not only with the parents but also with the case worker as well? Where do you fit in with this relationship?

Jaime Reinburn [00:17:20]: Well, my relationship is with the mother, who comes in and has her child removed. I'm there to be a support for her, to let her know that she's not alone. You know, that she can not only get her kids back but be successful, and my role is to try and empower them to, you know, be able to ask for services and be able to speak up on what they need for their family to be successful and how to utilize and interact with the department and the case workers to benefit everyone involved.

Tom Oates [00:17:49]: How much contact on a weekly basis do you have with each of your mentees?

Jaime Reinburn [00:17:54]: With the families I work with, some of 'em I have daily contact. Some of 'em that are progressing in their case, I mean, I at least talk to 'em once or twice a week. I see 'em once a week. Some that are at the beginning stages of their case, you might spend a lot more time with them because they're really in crisis. I mean, their children have been removed, and they don't know where to go. They don't know who to talk to. They don't know — they're scared. They're scared and alone, and they don't know who to trust, and so I'm there to try and help them build 'em up to let 'em know let's just tackle one thing at a time, you know?

So when they go in there they have a list of things they need to accomplish, you know? And sometimes it's very overwhelming, and they get lost in the shuffle sometimes, so if you can break that down and, like, "Here, let's just get this one thing done this week, and then we'll work on the next thing next week," and make it tangible for them, it's easier for them to be successful.

Tom Oates [00:18:43]: How much of this — 'cause I'm gathering from what you're talking about, there is — you are, you know, walking them through the system, what they need to get done, the processes and steps of this — you know, this endeavor that they're on.

Jaime Reinburn [00:18:56]: Correct.

Tom Oates [00:18:56]: But there's also a sense of kind of you're there as kind of a coach, as kind of a confidant for them, so how much work are you doing deals with the steps that they need to accomplish — but then there's also the emotional counseling, so to speak, that you're adding. How much of your role is one verse the other?

Jaime Reinburn [00:19:16]: I think it depends on each case. I mean, some are more emotionally needy because of the things that are going on. Some come into the system and have no family support. I was lucky enough to have all my family rally around me, you know what I mean? So I had people I could turn to, but there are some people that their whole family's unhealthy, so they come in. They have nobody but me. So some days it's 50/50. Some days I'm doing more of helping them find the services and resources in the community to help them not only be successful but not come into the eyes of the Department again. And then some just — they just need a shoulder to lean on. They need someone who can understand, relate, and let 'em know that, "Here, you've made some mistakes, but it doesn't make you necessarily a bad mom. You know, it doesn't mean you love your children any less. It's just, you know, we're gonna try and get you the help that you need so you and your family can be together and be successful and happy."

Tom Oates [00:20:08]: How much of your own past experiences do you rely upon when you're conveying stories or guiding somebody through the process?

Jaime Reinburn [00:20:15]: I rely on a lot of my past experiences. That's how I can relate to people of, I mean, different socioeconomics, different experiences, what they go through. I mean, I've got my own childhood trauma. I got my own substance abuse, my own family dynamics that I think I can relate to anymore anyone, and I rely on that, you know? And sometimes when you're working with the client or a mom, all they wanna know is, "Here, I know what you're going through because that same thing happened to me," or "I can relate to you because, you know what I mean, I've felt that same way, you know, at one point in my life." You know what I mean? And it does get better.

Tom Oates [00:20:49]: How do you personally manage just the stress and the stories that you're hearing from all these families. How do you get by as a person dealing with your day-to-day life? I mean, this can be stressful for the professionals, and you're in that boat too now. How do you kind of keep afloat?

Jaime Reinburn [00:21:11]: I think a lot of it — I mean, it depends on, like, I have to know what my own limitations are, and I have to know what I'd have to do to keep myself healthy on a daily basis, and for me, it's knowing — having clear boundaries and setting things, knowing, like, if there's something that I can't do or letting my client know that, "Here, I can't help you with that, but I can give you — get you in the right direction to help you with that." But, like, I — I'm active still in recovery. I still have a therapist, you know? I still — I reach out to my coordinators. I mean, I've had my own family crises along the way since being a Parent Partner, and I have to make sure that my home life is my home life and my work life is my work life, you know? And making sure I can balance both and not putting myself in danger then therefore I can't help my families who I work with.

Tom Oates [00:22:03]: Right. So for those agencies that are thinking about developing a Parent Partner Program or somebody who is thinking about maybe becoming a Parent Partner if this was offered to them, what makes somebody in your position successful? What are the skills that they really need to do the job well?

Jaime Reinburn [00:22:20]: Well, I think they need to have a passion for what they're doing. They have to have compassion and empathy for the People that they work with. I think they have to understand people's lives are different than theirs and understand that we have — be very objective and keep our own biases to our self 'cause sometimes we work with clients that we might not necessarily understand what they're going through or some of the choices they make, but that doesn't mean I can't still help that family.

Tom Oates [00:22:49]: So what keeps you coming back? I mean, what's — where does it come to the retention of these folks? Because it's a job, and you've been doing this for about, I guess, four and a half years, so what keeps you and your peers from keeping — you know, to putting this energy and this effort in?

Jaime Reinburn [00:23:09]: For me, the reason I keep coming back is because I enjoy helping these families grow. I enjoy seeing them getting their kids back. I enjoy every aspect of my job. I mean, I love working with people. I love that, you know what I mean? That I get to see the highlights of their life. I get to see 'em when they get their kids back. I get to see 'em, you know what I mean, when they make the connection on why they got involved with the department and how to make those changes, you know? I get to see that, and that — I mean, it gives me joy.

Tom Oates [00:23:41]: When you're talking to either a neighbor or a family member or somebody, and you're explaining this to them, what are those stories that you share about what are kind of, like, the good moments from what you do that's kinda stuck in your heart about a particular family?

Jaime Reinburn [00:23:55]: Like, I have a mom that has had — I mean, sometimes when you have previous DHS experience, the Department of Human Services, your kids have been involved before, you come in with a predisposed, you know, notion of what the department does, and when you can break down those walls and you can build that relationship between the work — case worker and the mom, to be successful and to work together, I mean, it's like you see a light bulb kinda go off, you know? And

they make the connection that the Department of Human Services are not this horrible enemy. They are somewhere that are actually looking out for children, which I was thankful DHS came into my life. I mean, I actually honestly thanked the lady because she saved my children's lives.

Tom Oates [00:24:36]: Right.

Jaime Reinburn [00:24:37]: You know? And making them understand that they're not bad people. They don't enjoy take — removing children. It's their job, and they have to do it for the safety of the family.

Tom Oates [00:24:47]: So Sandy, let me touch back and go to you here. So after you've been able to implement this — and I know you went state-wide a couple years back, if there's another state or another agency looking to develop a Parent Partner Program, what do you stress to them over anything else that they should do?

SANDY LINT [00:25:04]: You must have parents involved in the planning, the development, and the implementation. Their voice needs to be front and center. I feel it's the state's job to really listen to them and sort of figure out, take their ideas, and help support how they want to approach providing the mentoring services. I also think it's key to have leadership from the top and from the local level. It — without it, you can't do it. It needs to be a partnership. We call it the three-legged stool. It needs to be the Parent Partner, the coordinator, and the DHS supervisor at the local level need to be in on all decisions, and we have modeled ourselves around that concept, but parents and their stories and their ability to connect with family are key.

You have to take the time to nurture the trust between DHS and those parents. If there's distrust at all or there's a parent running rogue, it can have some setbacks for your program, so being able to have those open communications and building the trust and recognizing that there's gonna be some relapse, there's gonna be some things that are going to need to be addressed along the way, but as long as everybody's got a full understanding of that and they build that trust factor is the most important thing.

Tom Oates [00:26:38]: Well, finally, Sarah, you know, as Sandy talks about implementing a program and a buy-in, you need it all, kind of a three-legged stool, how do you sustain it? How do you keep this program going year after year and potentially, as you guys have done, expand this across a larger region?

Sara Persons [00:26:56]: Well, I think that for us, sustainability has been important and successful thus far because we have buy-in through leadership of the department and with community providers throughout the state. We are always asking parents at the end of their DHS case if they want to be Parent Partners, so we're constantly training new ones all the time. In terms of some numbers to just show you the growth in the last three years, the first year our target number to mentor was 850. We mentored over 1,200. This year, our target number's 1,800, and we've already met that.

Tom Oates [00:27:38]: Wow.

Sara Persons [00:27:39]: So I think sustainability is — it's a program that just kind of sells itself because they're the experts at the table, and they do amazing work.

Tom Oates [00:27:48]: Sandy Lint, Sarah Persons, and Jamie Reinburn, thank you guys so much.

Sara Persons [00:27:52]: Thank you.

Tom Oates [00:27:56]: What I liked about that the most was that we could bring both the perspectives from the decision-makers within the state along with those implementing the program and the Parent Partners themselves. So many programs are executed and sustained at that ground, that grassroots level, but the direction, the investment, and the buy-in from the top is just as important. Now if you head to childwelfare.gov and search podcasts, we'll have a link to a description of Iowa's Parent Partner Approach from the California Evidenced-Based Clearinghouse, along with some resources from Information Gateway on family engagement, a partnering with families to improve child welfare outcomes, along with a Parent Partner job description.

So I want to thank Sandy Lint, Sarah Persons, and Jamie Reinburn for lending their time and their perspective, and I wanna thank you for listening and being a part of this community. As always, you can connect with information Gateway at info@childwelfare.gov. Let us know your questions or how we can help you find the information you're looking for. You can connect with us on Facebook and Twitter, or visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at childwelfare.gov.

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Female Speaker [00:29:26]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect those of Information Gateway or the Children's Bureau.