



New Foster Care Initiative Spotlights Parent Advocates

I've worked for years as a foster care services professional and helped to reunite many families. But it is never easy. We enter parents' lives at the worst possible moment—when the children they love have been removed from their homes. At that point, parents are experiencing shame, anger, and confusion. They are frightened and frustrated by the “intrusion” of the child welfare system into their lives. And they fear losing their children permanently, perhaps because that's what happened to a neighbor or a friend.

As professional service providers, we empathize deeply with these parents. We want to work with them, but we often don't know all of what they're going through and what they genuinely need. What's more, parents, who often do not let down their guard when we interact, are unlikely to tell us everything on their minds. When planners and parents cannot connect, an unintentional gulf between them opens, making progress more difficult to achieve.

Rising Ground, one of two New York City human services providers (Graham Windham was also chosen) selected by the New York City Administration

for Children's Services (ACS) to pilot the new Parents Supporting Parents initiative, is attempting to bridge that gap by participating in the demonstration project that, it is hoped, will help break down the barriers.

ACS calls this initiative “groundbreaking” because, for the first time, parent advocates will play a central role on the New York City case planning team. ACS Commissioner David A. Hansell has publicly stated that “elevating the voices of parents is a critical strategy to reunify families more quickly and is part of our effort to increase parent involvement and input across all of our programs. We are confident that engaging parent advocates will result in better outcomes for children and families in New York City.”

Parent advocates understand parents. They have walked in the same shoes, felt the same emotions, and overcome the same obstacles. Including them in case planning units will add the essential perspective of parents in case decision-making. This is hugely valuable and a big step forward.

Advocates can positively influence parents who might be resistant to services or accepting responsibility for creating

unsafe environments for their children. That's because parent advocates are seen as “credible messengers,” or people who have faced adversity similar to the challenges encountered by the persons they support. They've had children in foster care and successfully navigated the system in order to reunify their families. They are living proof that other parents currently involved in the system can reunify their families, too—that they can be successful.

Parent advocates serve as guides, confidants, and mentors to individuals who are willing to talk and listen to someone who knows what they are going through—someone they can trust.

Because of that trust, parent advocates can authentically and more effectively engage, inform, and support parents. They will accompany parents to court and to family team meetings. They will specify the type of supports a parent truly needs. Parent advocates will be trained to help parents cope with the many shapes and forms of trauma and stress.

“Time and time again, we have seen across Rising Ground's programs that children, adults, and families benefit greatly from having access to the know-how of individuals with lived experience,” says Alan Mucatel, CEO of Rising Ground. “We are proud to be one of two organizations selected for the Parents Supporting Parents initiative, so we can start using this practice with families who have children in foster care.”

How It Will Work

While lived experience is an essential prerequisite for the role, parent advocates will require training and ongoing support. Rise, a parent-led, nationally recognized advocacy organization for parent empowerment, will provide the training. Rise has played an instrumental role in finding ways to amplify parent voices in New York City and partnered with ACS to shape the Parents Supporting Parents initiative, which reflects the Rise perspective.

“A child's removal is devastating to parents' humanity, dignity, and identity,” explains Jeanette Vega, assistant director of training and policy at Rise, who has been involved in the child welfare system herself. “Advocates trained by Rise will be working in a way that resists system dynamics of shame, blame, punishment, and harm and that creates a community

of care and support for one another.”

Parent advocates, who will connect with parents on day one to begin their support, will be involved in every decision made by the case-planning team. Specifically, parent advocates will be expected to assist with the following functions:

- informing parents about the child welfare and family court processes;
- talking about coping with trauma and toxic stress;
- supporting parents’ self-determination in case planning;
- helping to identify and connect parents to community resources such as public benefits, services, and education and employment opportunities;
- supporting high-quality family time during child visitations;
- preparing parents for family team conferences; and
- attending transitional and family team conferences, court appearances, and other appointments with parents.

The Evidence

Does the parent-advocate approach improve outcomes? The evidence says yes.

Casey Family Programs, one of several funders backing the ACS initiative, reported that similar peer-support programs have achieved higher rates of reunification for participating parents, lower rates of reentry for their children, and increased participation in services and court hearings. According to the

Casey 2019 strategy brief “How Do Parent Partner Programs Instill Hope and Support Prevention and Reunification?,” peer mentors instill hope in parents, strengthen their self-advocacy skills, and accelerate reunification. “[They] serve to bridge the gap between birth parents and a complex, often challenging, and overwhelming system,” the report states.

As of last November, Rising Ground is recruiting four parent advocates for the pilot. Once the advocates are trained, they will be assigned to new intake cases. It is expected that parent advocates will begin their work with families in early 2021.

Implications for the Future

It is expected that parent advocates will have a profound impact on family foster care services, including helping to “humanize” parents. With the

endorsement of parent advocates who have gone through the process, families will feel more comfortable to engage more authentically with case planners.

As a result, the culture of family foster care will change. Case planners will gain insights into the family’s life that they may not have had before, no matter how diligent they have been. Planners will use their new understanding when working with cases in the future.

“Our teams will see and learn from the parent advocates’ lived experience,” Mucatel says. “It will make our services so much better.”

Although the demonstration project is small, it has promise to reshape how foster care services are delivered in New York City. ACS has set a goal to augment every case-planning unit in New York City with a parent advocate.

The Parents Supporting Parents initiative is Rising Ground’s chance to work with ACS and Rise to put theory into action, build a structure with Rise to test assumptions, and develop meaningful and impactful parent-advocate roles. By all indications, the Parents Supporting Parents initiative should accelerate family reunifications—the true purpose of family foster care services. ■

Rising Ground applauds ACS for advancing this effort and is thankful for the charitable foundations funding this work: Casey Family Programs, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Redlich Horwitz Foundation, and the Warner Fund.

Debra McCall, LCSW-R, is vice president of family foster care programs at Rising Ground, one of the largest and most impactful human services organizations in New York City.



A parent and her child visit a member of Rising Ground's case planning team.

Bridging the Gap Between Parents and Foster Parents, Too

Rising Ground has another arrow in its quiver to empower parents while their children are in care: coparenting. With foster care coparenting, parents are in frequent contact and closely involved in their children’s day-to-day worlds. Parents fully participate in decisions about their children, such as health, diet, and recreational activities. Frequent interaction preserves and nurtures the parent-child bond, and children are less likely to feel a divided loyalty between their parents and foster family.

Coparenting also expands the role of foster parents. They become mentors and support parents as they build confidence and parenting skills. Coparenting is expected to hasten family reunifications and make them last.

Rising Ground is the first human services organization in New York State to pilot coparenting. The initiative is funded by the Redlich Horwitz Foundation.

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