

Berkeley Social Welfare

The Promise of Peer Mentors in  
TANF: Lessons from Child  
Welfare

Jill Duerr Berrick

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Today's Focus

**Who Are Peer Mentors?**

**Why Use Peer Mentors?**

**Features Of The Peer Mentor Model**

**Lessons Learned From Child**

**Welfare**

# Peer Support in Allied Fields of Practice

## Mental Health

- Decreases stigma
- Increases access to positive role models
- Promotes social integration
- Improves quality of life

## Child Welfare

- May increase reunification
- Increases engagement

## Health

- Competence
- Empowerment
- Reassurance
- Decline in fear and distress
- **Addictions**
  - Hope
  - Confidence
  - Duration of engagement

# What Are Peer Mentors?

Current or former clients engaged as allies in the process of engagement and change



# Role of Peer Mentor

Mentor

Advocate

Translator

Coach



# Principles of Peer Mentor Programs

Recognition of individual and family strengths

Clients are experts about what they need

Social support

Peer support & mutual aid

# Why might it “Work”?

- Reciprocity
- Mutual assistance
- Lack of social distance
- “Sameness” of experience
- Exposure to new “worldviews”
- Safety of assuming new roles
- Safe environment for disclosing distress.

# What do child welfare parents say about why it works?

Shared experience  
Communication  
Support  
Hope





# Shared Experience

*“The (peer mentor) is still more ... they’re on your level and they’ve experienced what they have experienced; they went through what you went through. And the CPS workers haven’t went through it; they just went through the school. Most of the CPS workers are just school smart—they’re not experienced and went through it.”*

# Communication

Peer Mentors admired for:

- plain talk
- frequent contact
- contact with other professionals
- acting as a role model
- availability
- accessibility during nights and weekends

# Support

A key intervention

- Emotional support
- Material support
- Support in developing self-reliance
- Support regarding substance abuse and other family challenges / work-related barriers

# Hope

- “I am the face of success.”
- A personally redemptive experience



# TANF / Child Welfare Parallels

## TANF

- Engagement in services key
- Barriers to engagement manifold
- Urgency – time is of the essence
- Population characteristics
- **DIFFERENCES?**
- Goal: Work

## Child Welfare

- Engagement in services key
- Barriers to engagement manifold
- Urgency – time is of the essence
- Population characteristics
- **DIFFERENCES?**
- Goal: Safe reunification

# A paradigm shift



- Intimidation
- Powerless
- Marginalized
- Mystical system
- Silence
- Empowerment
- Powerful
- Central to change process
- Transparent system
- Voice



Peer Support Groups  
One-on-One Mentoring

## PEER MENTOR MODELS

# Peer Support Groups





# The Mendocino Model

- Intake Groups
  - 8 weeks
  - Therapist facilitated
  - Focused on emotional aspects of service experience
- Empowerment Groups
  - Non-time limited
  - Social worker facilitated; peer directed
  - Focused on process of change
  - Develop weekly “action plans”

# Peer Coaches / Peer Mentors

*If they can do it, so can I.*



# Who are Peer Mentors?

Former clients of the child welfare system

All experienced:

Child removal

Services

Stable reunification

Life-trained paraprofessionals

# A New Paradigm

No-fault match

Inclusion of fathers

Delayed service termination

- Opportunity to re-open at parent request

- No wait-list

Informal vs. formal services offered

Parent Partners live and work in client communities

A relationship-based approach, free of bureaucracy and paperwork

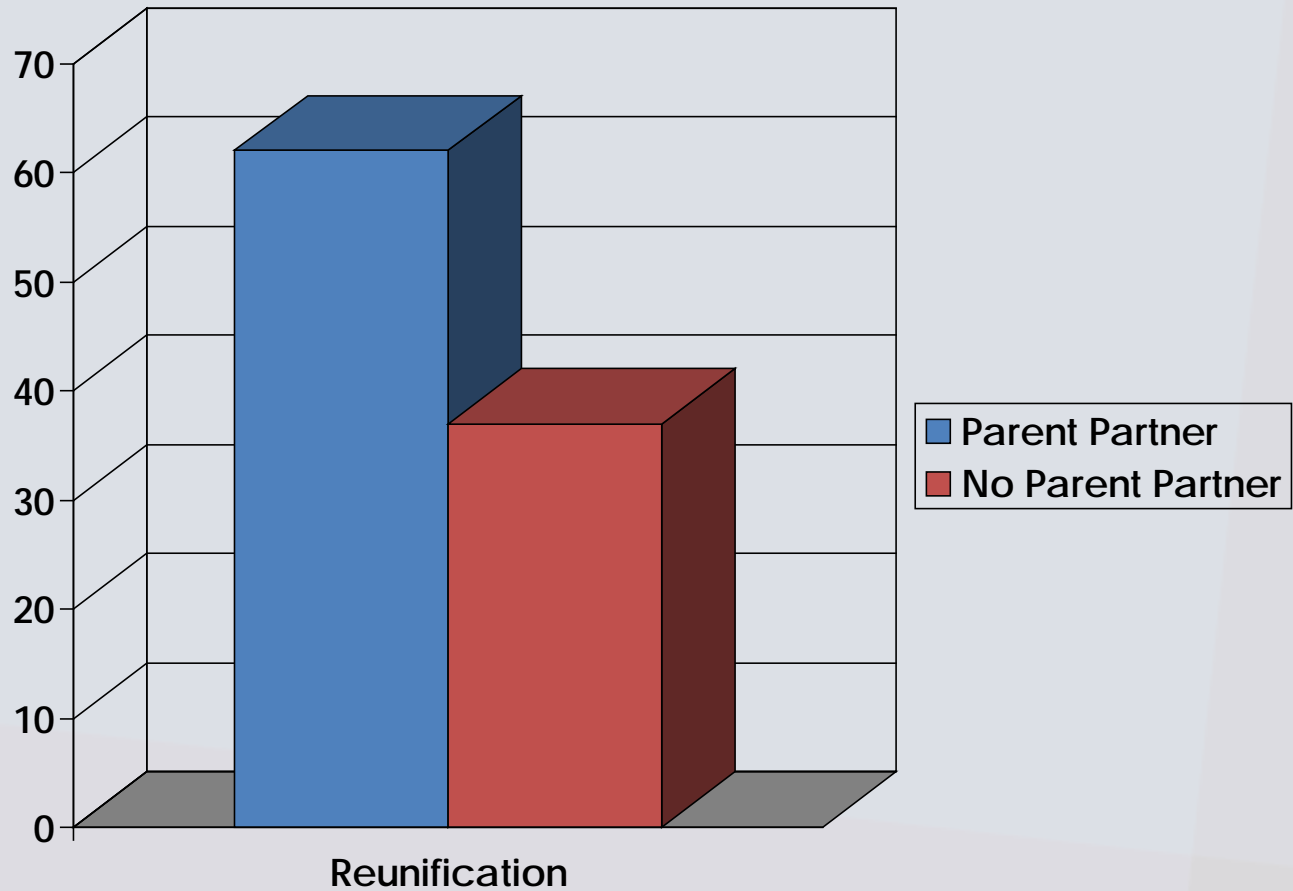
# From Adversary to Advocate

Allied Professionals' views:

- Very positive reviews
- Reduces parents' anxiety
- Increases parents' understanding of the child welfare system
- Changes allied professionals' views about parents

# Findings

## Outcomes





# LESSONS LEARNED FROM OTHER CHILD WELFARE



# Organizational Context

- Requires leadership
  - Collaborative spirit
  - Legitimizes role
  - Addresses staff fear and/or misunderstanding
  - Introduces peer mentors to allied professionals
  - Bends the bureaucracy

# Organizational Creativity

- May require thoughtful interface with HR
- May be precluded from direct contact with children
- CBOs may be the hiring unit

# Peer Staff Strengths and Challenges

- Passionate
- Justice-oriented
- Resourceful
- Compassionate
- Little work history
- Limited knowledge of workplace etiquette and discourse
- Written and verbal skills may not be sophisticated



# Sensitive Supervision

- Customized supervision
- Includes personal and professional growth and development
- Relationship-based rather than rigidly hierarchical
- Importance of an emotionally-safe space
- Acculturation to a climate of sensitive, reflective supervision

# Support for Professional Skills

- Dress
- Keeping appointment calendars
- Timeliness to meetings
- Appropriate language
- Tone of voice
- Humor
- Balanced advocacy

# Support for Role Change

- From client to staff member
  - How does it feel to enter the TANF building?
  - How do they respond to substance-involved clients when their own recovery may feel fresh?
  - How do they manage feelings of ambivalence toward the agency?

# Support for Collaboration

- Managing confidentiality
- Managing dual alliances
- Supporting – not undermining – social workers



# Support for Managing Boundaries

- Flexible, open, familiar relationships with parents
- Sharing personal details and stories
- Cell phone availability
- 24/7 availability
- Daily living in familiar schools and neighborhoods



# Setting Limits on Professional Knowledge and Skill

- Peer mentors are *not* social work professionals.
- Many family challenges are outside of their scope of practice
  - DV
  - Mental health treatment
  - Developmental disabilities
  - Substance abuse

# Support for Managing and Maintaining Recovery

- The single highest risk factor for losing peer mentors

# Benefits to the Peer Mentor

- Empowering
- Develops powerful workplace experience
- Can help support positive parenting and continued recovery
- Transformative experience of redemption



*“You have an attorney. You have a social worker. And then there’s a judge. There’s all these people against you. They’re all sitting over here, and you’re this little lone person sitting over here by yourself, and they’re telling you all this stuff that you’ve been doing wrong. [Your peer mentor is] like that star, like that light in a bunch of blackness that you’re like-oh, god; somebody that will help me. [She’s] here for you.”*

Parent client



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