

Challenges & Solutions

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STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CHILD SAFETY, PERMANENCY, AND WELL-BEING IN NYS

Parents Supporting Parents A New Way to Help Children and Families

Families have their own strengths and possibilities, and each is shaped so differently. Parents are really asking, 'How can we find a way to be a family?'

Jacquelyn Israel, parent advocate, Graham Windham Services for Children and Families

Parent advocates help parents find a way to be a family, which usually means helping them get back together with their children who are placed in foster care. As parents who have also had a child in foster care, parent advocates offer hope, compassion, understanding, and energy to families struggling to regain themselves as families.

Agencies across New York State are beginning to appreciate the support that a parent advocate can offer to parents, first, and staff, second. One requirement for the position is that the parent advocates have successfully completed their service plan and fully reunited with their children. It is from this experience that the parent advocate learns, grows, and acquires the advocacy skills needed to pass on to others in a similar situation.

Through its Office of Advocacy, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in New York City has taken the lead in developing a network of agencies that provide parent-to-parent advocates. The approximately twenty New York City foster care agencies vary in how they staff and fund the positions, but activities generally include helping engage parents, attending case conferences, accompanying parents to treatment programs and to court, helping parents navigate the system, managing support groups, and representing the parent voice in meetings with public officials.

Specifically, what the parent advocate does depends on his or her own experience and the needs of families in the agency. As a housing specialist at Miracle Makers, Inc., Ramona Bonitto-Jerido engages families around the specific need for housing. "My first ten families had housing as a barrier, and eventually, all ten were able to have their children returned." This was a powerful experience for her. Thanking her, the parents noted how important it was that she had "street knowledge, not just book knowledge." She says that the personal experience of parent advocates helps enrich the soil and water the plants (families) so they can grow and blossom.

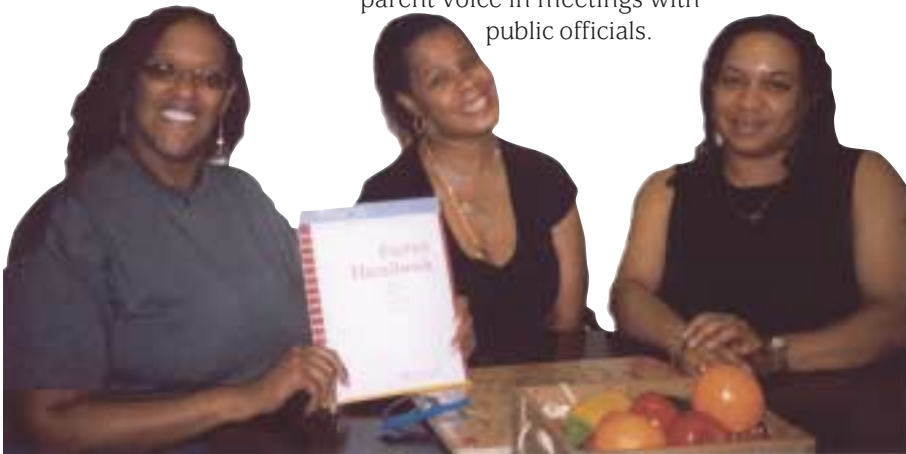
In her position at the Center for Family Representation, Denise Gaines works with lawyers and social workers as well as parents. She has conducted focus groups – such as one to identify problems with family court – and trainings. "When my child was removed, I grew so much. I questioned how things worked, and I learned to empower myself. I learned what I needed to do to get my child back." Now, when she meets a family in distress, she tells them she was once like them. She tells them, "This bump in the road can make you stronger."

Jacquelyn Israel, parent advocate at Graham Windham, sees her role as a vehicle to help families figure out what is best for them. She tells parents, "showing up" is key. "My goal is to help families get back together, but I don't do the footwork. I'll give the tools and be supportive – I always let them know how to reach me – but I want to show them how to advocate for themselves." At the same time, she looks out for their interests: "I am here to make things easier and smoother. I see events from a different perspective than a caseworker and can voice them differently."

Viviane DeMilly, director, ACS Office of Advocacy, agrees: "Some messages are received more easily if said by a parent than by staff."

(l to r)

*Denise Gaines,
Ramona Bonitto-Jerido,
and Jacquelyn Israel
parent advocates in
New York City*



Learning from Tribal Leaders

“New York State is rich in the diversity of its population which enhances its culture and lifestyle. First among the inhabitants were Native Americans... . They reside in every county with some continuing to live on reservation lands located throughout the state.”

So begins *A Proud Heritage: Native American Services in New York State*, the OCFS guide to services available to Native Americans through state agencies. To enhance the development and provision of these services, the Tribal Consultation Strategy has as its goals to (1) create a regular, ongoing dialogue and consultation with Tribal leaders; (2) distribute materials and tools to local districts and voluntary agencies to increase awareness of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA); (3) provide training on ICWA; and (4) establish an OCFS Native American Services Committee.

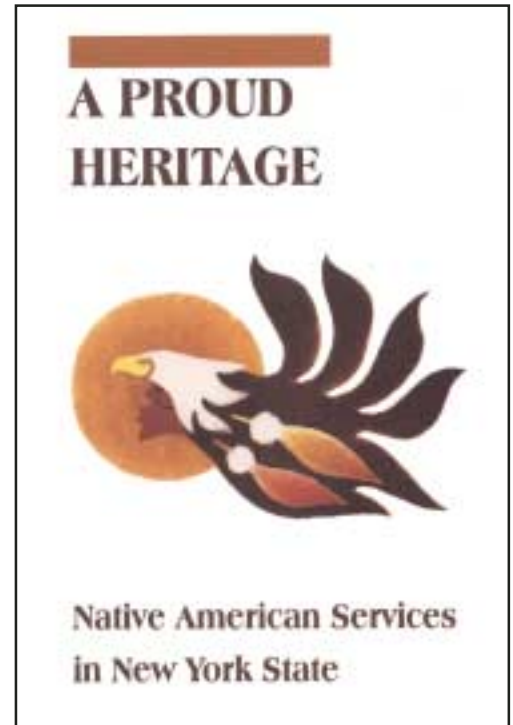
Now in their third year, the Tribal Consultation meetings bring together Tribal leaders, Clan Mothers, Council members, and Tribal staff with OCFS staff in an ongoing conversation about how best to serve Native American children and families involved with the child welfare system. As a measure of the trust engendered in the first meeting, which was held at the Syracuse Regional Office, the rest of the meetings have been

held, by invitation, at the Oneida Indian Nation’s Children and Elders Center.

“It has been wonderful to see the interest and enthusiasm of the Tribal leaders and other participants,” says Kim Thomas, Native American Affairs Specialist. “It is gratifying to have representatives of four or five Indian Nations come together, and, on one occasion, all seven Iroquois Nations.”

Participants address the questions: How do caseworkers learn to identify Native American children coming into the system? How can we make sure that the child’s Indian Nation (tribe) is informed and engaged? If the child needs placement, how do we identify kinship care first? How do we find culturally appropriate services and treatment programs?” According to Ms. Thomas, “The tide has changed. Caseworkers now see the benefit of having the support and knowledge of the child’s tribe.”

In another format, a consortium – known as the Native American Family Services Commission – is held quarterly



For a copy of *A Proud Heritage* (Pub. 4629) and *A Guide to Compliance with the Federal Indian Child Welfare Act in New York State* (Pub. 4757), go to the OCFS website: www.ocfs.state.ny.us. For more information, contact Kim Thomas, (716) 847-3123; kim.thomas@dfa.state.ny.us.

to address training topics and to work toward change in the system. In addition to the participants who attend the ongoing meetings are staff from local districts, schools, voluntary agencies, and service providers who work with Native American children. The most recent consortium was held on September 15, 2004.

Challenges & Solutions

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John A. Johnson, Commissioner

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Health Services Manual Gets National Attention

In its NRCFCPP Weekly Update, 05/26/04, the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning at Hunter College School of Social Work, highlighted the manual, *Working Together: Health Services for Children in Foster Care*, January 2004:

“The New York State Office of Children and Family Services developed this manual with the assistance and advice of voluntary agencies and county departments of social services, and is based on extensive research into laws, regulations, and best practices. The primary audiences are foster care caseworkers, supervisors, and persons responsible for the coordination of health services. It is not specifically designed for distribution to foster parents, child care workers, or health care practitioners, though some information may be appropriate to share with these individuals. The policies, protocols, and legal footnotes are specific to New York State’s locally administered, state supervised foster care system. However, it contains some more general information and serves as an excellent model.”

For a copy of the manual, go to: www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/sppd/health_services/manual.asp.

Adolescents

New Policies, Practices, & Youth Voices

A Teleconference

At the August 17, 2004 teleconference on adolescents, policy makers, local district staff, a trainer, a mentor, and two enthusiastic young people came together to present the new framework for practice with adolescents in foster care. In a lively exchange, participants described the action plan of the Adolescent Services and Outcomes Strategy and discussed the key concepts of practice:

- Enable youth to develop into healthy, functional citizens with permanent attachments to supportive adults, families, and communities.
- Provide adolescents with supports needed to make the transition to self-sufficiency.

An associated *Adolescent Services and Outcomes Practice Guidance Paper* was developed by the workgroup to assist local districts and agencies in strengthening services to adolescents. The paper contains a wealth of resources and contact information as well as a comparison of current independent living (IL) regulations and proposed adolescent services regulations for youth in foster care. Themes throughout the paper include ongoing exploration of permanency alternatives for youth in foster care, emphasis on adult permanency resources, earlier discharge planning, and an expanded focus on educational opportunities and youth involvement.

Teleconference participants discussed the Independent Living Network in regions across the state, the training offered through the IL Core Training and the IL Toolbox, and the adolescent leadership activities available to youth in foster

care through regional teams and a statewide team.

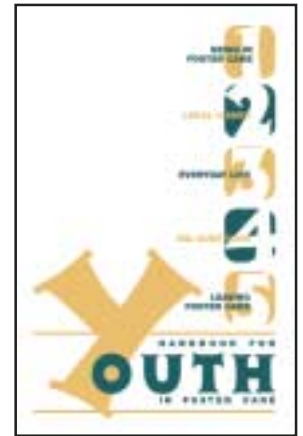
Through the statewide team, Youth in Progress, youth are working in partnership with OCFS to improve positive outcomes for youth and their families. Their priorities are: dispelling negative stereotypes of youth in foster care; improving services during and when leaving foster care; and improving policies on clothing allowances, stipends, and youth opportunity to make decisions. They are currently making a video to accompany the recently published *Handbook for Youth in Foster Care*, which resulted from work with the youth over the past year.

For Asia Moore, one of the two young people participating in the teleconference, "It's so fulfilling to see things happen that were just ideas a year ago." She encouraged other youth to get involved in the leadership team. Dave Serwinowski, who will be aging out of foster care this year, said, "I want to be able to make a difference to others in the foster care system. It's my calling." He appreciates the support provided by those involved with the team.

The teleconference ended with youth mentor John Amos urging adults in the audience to "step up to the plate if you want to help youth develop leadership skills through one-on-one contact." He sees his work as an investment in the lives of youth in foster care and a way to support youth in helping shape policy.

For more information, contact Linda Brown, (716) 847-3145; linda.brown@dfa.state.ny.us.

For a copy of the Adolescent Services and Outcomes Practice Guidance Paper, July 2004 (04-OCFS-INF-07), contact your Regional Office or go to the OCFS Intranet site. For a copy of the Handbook for Youth in Foster Care, August 2004, contact your Regional Office.



The Handbook for Youth in Foster Care gives information to youth on entering foster care, legal issues, everyday life, health, sexuality, education, and leaving foster care. Youth reviewed the text and contributed comments, which are provided in quotation marks throughout the handbook.

Administration for Children and Families' Staff View Progress

On May 17-18, 2004, the Office of Children and Family Services met with staff from the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) for New York State's Annual Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to jointly review New York's progress on the first year of implementation of the CFSR Program Improvement Plan (PIP). The CFSR PIP was approved by ACF on April 14, 2003 for a two-year period.

With approximately fifteen people in attendance, OCFS presented an overview of the accomplishments to date in New York State. This included presentations

via video-conferencing by PIP Strategy Coordinators on the following strategies: permanency mediation; support for foster parents; strengthening supports for adolescents; family engagement including locating birth fathers and their families, family meetings/family group conferencing, and family visitation; concurrent planning; assessment of risk and safety; strengthening the service plan review process; and strengthening the interface between the courts and child welfare.

OCFS described the process by which child welfare outcome improvement agendas have been developed at the local level with technical assistance

from Regional Offices and the production of CFSR PIP Data Packets for each county to measure improvement on the outcomes of safety and permanency. The group reviewed the status of individual deliverables in the CFSR PIP and reached agreement about some minor amendments regarding completion dates and wording of action steps. Those amendments will be reflected in future quarterly reports submitted to ACF by OCFS.

Overall, the meeting was positive, and there was agreement that New York is proceeding with the implementation of the PIP as planned.

Strategy Coordinators . . .

Who they are and how to contact them.

OCFS's Program Improvement Plan (PIP), which addresses the federal Child & Family Service Review (CFSR), contains 12 strategies to improve child safety, permanency, and well-being. The strategies – and eight specific areas under #1 – are listed here along with the OCFS coordinator for each strategy.

For general information about implementation of the CFSR PIP, contact Lee Lounsbury at (518) 402-6539; lee.lounsbury@dfa.state.ny.us.

1 Support for Strengths Based, Family Focused Practice

- A.** Enhancing initial engagement and assessment for families reported to the State Central Register to reduce repeat incidents of maltreatment
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373, Catherine Grose (518) 474-9584
- B.** Family conferencing and early engagement
Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- C.** Enhancing family supports
Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- D.** Strengthening case planning and Service Plan Review processes
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373
- E.** Strengthening family visitation (with parents and siblings in care)
Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- F.** Promoting placement stability and child well-being through improved assessments of children's behavioral and mental health needs
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Mimi Weber (518) 486-1106
- G.** Supporting the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency, and well-being
Renee Hallock (518) 474-4726
- H.** Enhancing quality assurance and continuous improvements in practice
Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879

2 Concurrent Planning Implementation

Jack Klump (315) 423-1200; Michelle Rafael (518) 474-4352

3 Safety and Well-Being of Children in Congregate Care

Patricia Sheehy (914) 377-2080; Shelley Murphy (518) 402-6546

4 Permanency Options: Mediation

Michelle Rafael (518) 474-4352

5 Adolescent Services and Outcomes

Linda Brown (716) 847-3145; Diana Fenton (518) 474-0014

6 Development and Piloting of a Differentiated Protective Services Response to Allegations of Child Maltreatment

Jamie Greenberg (518) 473-1327

7 Workforce Development: Staff Recruitment, Retention and Development

Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879; Peter Miraglia (518) 474-9645
Margo Velez-Lemmerman (518) 474-2960

8 Workload Management Support

William McLaughlin (518) 486-7078

9 Improving the Statewide Information Systems

Karen Vergoni (518) 474-7087; Lillian Denton (518) 474-6947

10 Tribal Consultation

Christine Heywood (518) 474-9465; Kim Thomas (716) 847-3123

11 Improve Relationships and Interface between the Family Court and the Child Welfare System

Gail Gordon (518) 473-8418; Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743
Kathleen DeCataldo (518) 473-9551; Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805

12 Improve Cross-systems Collaboration and Increase Service Array and Access

Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Larry Pasti (518) 561-8740

E-mail addresses for coordinators consist of the firstname.lastname@dfa.state.ny.us (as in jane.doe@dfa.state.ny.us).

Parents Supporting Parents from page 1

Parents attending the Parent Advisory Workgroup, organized by the Office of Advocacy, often discuss relationships with staff at their monthly meetings. There may be resistance from staff because of an apparent cultural bias against parents in the system or because working with parents is new and unfamiliar. And parents may be hostile to staff as a result of bad experiences in the past; on the other hand, they may be friends with staff, which can be difficult if they don't agree with the staff member's approach.

Tanya Krupat, ACS special projects coordinator, notes that an agency's tone and culture are very important for integrating parent advocates into agency practice. She encourages agencies to

include parent advocates in staff meetings and to seek their input on policy and practice. "It takes work to get parents and staff to come together, to realize that everyone has different expertise to offer families." But the rewards are "fantastic."

In addition to the parent workgroup, ACS coordinates a Parent Advocate Consortium, held quarterly for the past two years. The goals are to provide support, training, and networking opportunities for parent advocates and agency coordinators and to identify projects that will lead to changes in ways of working with families. Other sources of training include the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), mini-MAPP, Child Welfare Practice CORE training, and individual

agency programs.

When asked to describe a specific time when her support was important to a parent, Denise Gaines recalls reassuring a nervous mother both before and during an elevated risk conference. This was one example where a calm, experienced support person helped pave the way to effective communication and a positive outcome.

For more information on parent support programs in New York City and around the state – such as Families Together in Albany, Tompkins County DSS, and Hillside Children's Center in Rochester – contact Linda Kurtz, (585) 238-8200; linda.kurtz@dfa.state.ny.us.