**Expanding Support from Parent to Parent**

*“When my parent advocate stepped in at the moments when I was stuck, what made the biggest difference for me was being believed. Unlike when I was a child, I could speak up, and my words finally had power.”*

*-- Rebecca Mohammed, 2019,* [*Rise Magazine*](https://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/RiseIssue_35_Parent-Advocacy.pdf)

There are different names given to parents with lived child welfare experience who provide peer support to other parents with open child welfare cases. In some places, they’re called parent advocates. In other places they’re called parent allies or parent mentors or parent peer supports. Whatever they’re called, these parents work to allow the voices of parents in the system to be heard and offer support to parents throughout the life of their case.

Some of these parents work outside of the child welfare system, at independent advocacy, legal, mental health and grassroots organizations, while others work within the system. This package explores how some states have come to recognize the importance of having parents work within the child welfare system and have expanded their roles.

In this package you can read about:

**Washington State and the Parents for Parents Program: How Legislation Spread Parent-to-Parent Statewide**

*In Washington state, the* [*Parents for Parents (P4P)*](https://www.childrenshomesociety.org/parentsforparents) *program implemented by Children’s Home Society of Washington provides support to parents involved in the child welfare system by parents who have successfully navigated the system, called parent allies. Parent allies meet parents at their first court hearing, acknowledge their shared experience as system-affected parents, offer their support, provide parents information about community resources, and invite parents to a one-time, two-hour class about the child welfare system created by parents for parents. After the class, P4P offers ongoing support throughout a parent’s case, and recruits those same parents to support other parents after they achieve successful case outcomes.*

*At the local level, parent allies lead all P4P programs. Statewide, Children’s Home Society of Washington employs parents to provide oversight, coordination, start-up training, technical assistance, and quality monitoring and to consult with other states and tribes to spread the model.*

*In 2015, the nine P4P programs in operation were receiving ongoing funding from the state’s child welfare agency. Then the agency reported that it was projected to be millions of dollars in deficit and would be cutting funding from many programs, including P4P. Although some P4P programs found money from the Court Improvement Program or had additional dollars through local or private grants, the loss of this contract threatened to close the doors of many P4P programs.*

*It was then that Children’s Home Society of Washington and the P4P program decided to approach the Washington state legislature for funding and to take P4P statewide. The bill,* [*SB 5486,*](https://partnersforourchildren.org/policy/bill-tracker/sb-5486-relating-creating-parents-parents-program) *received broad bipartisan support—131 yeas to 14 nays—and was signed into law in 2015. By June 2021, with funding from the state legislature through the Washington State Office of Public Defense, P4P expanded to 20 sites statewide, and is active in all Washington state counties.*

*Below is an interview[[1]](#footnote-1) that the International Parent Advocacy Network (IPAN) did with Heather Cantamessa, currently the national family impact program manager at Children’s Home Society of Washington and IPAN board president, regarding her experience as one of many parent allies working to pass this bill.*

**Q: How did parent allies help to gain support for the passage of bill SB5486?**

**Cantamessa:** In 2015, when P4P learned that its funding would be cut, Children’s Home Society of Washington decided that trying to pass a bill to make P4P a statewide program was the best way to ensure the program’s long-term stability, and people there began to mobilize. There were lots of challenges, including the challenge of passing a bill that supported parents with child welfare involvement and the stigma that comes with that; however, Children’s Home Society of Washington had a statewide network of parent allies with lived child welfare experience*,* like myself*,* who were passionate about the program and who would help to make the case for the bill.

Children’s Home Society of Washington took charge of coordinating efforts. Leading the effort was a system-affected parent with years of policy experience, Alise Morrissey, as well as a professional lobbyist, Laurie Lippold. Together with other parent allies and professionals in the field they drafted the bill, developed common language to use in support of the bill, found sponsors for the bill, and mobilized parent allies around the state to work to get our local representatives on board.

I was the program coordinator for the P4P program in Spokane County at the time. A lot of us P4P coordinators mobilized efforts, working locally to form a statewide effort to support the bill. We asked to meet with legislators. We put passion into telling the story of the P4P program because it was our program. We also had parents write letters about how impactful the program was. Other stakeholders who knew our stories also wrote letters and offered testimony. They gave us credibility. The local district legislators knew the barriers parents were facing. Educating them about P4P’s impact and benefits got them to become our supporters.

P4P also had had two evaluations at that time, one completed in 2011 and another in 2012. Among other positive benefits, the research found that parents who were part of P4P had higher attendance at court hearings and visitations, as well as an increased perception of control over their case outcomes. Those studies led the University of Washington to award P4P Promising Practice status. Having those evaluations demonstrated what parent allies like myself and supportive stakeholders had seen with our own eyes: that this program works. Having research as well as real-life stories made a big difference in getting legislators on board.

**Q: Can you tell us how you learned how to connect with your local representatives?**

**Cantamessa:** At first, it was really intimidating, but Children’s Home Society of Washington developed language that we could all use along with our own personal stories to make the case for P4P. They also provided us with information about how to contact our local representatives. Parent allies around the state with more experience doing policy work invited those of us with less experience to join them when they met with their local representatives. We went and listened and learned from them.

I also learned to do things like email my representatives, go to their public forums, get on their mailing lists, find out what they’re doing and what they’re interested in, and make a connection. I learned to always cc’ their legislative assistants, because they are their trusted informants. I would ask for a meeting in legislators’ offices or in coffee shops. It really didn’t take very many times to form relationships.

**Q: Who was opposed and how did you address the issues that concerned them?**

**Cantamessa:** To start, some legislators opposed our bill because we initially called ourselves veteran parents. We meant that we were veterans of the child welfare system but some legislators believed strongly that the term veterans should only be used to describe heroes that fight in wars for our country. That kind of knocked us down.

But when you’re trying to build consensus in order to pass a bill, you really need to listen to feedback and be responsive to the people whose support you’re trying to gain, especially when it comes to specific language in your bill. We had to ask ourselves whether changing what we called ourselves would fundamentally change the value of the bill we were trying to pass, and our answer was no, it would not. That’s where we came up with term parent allies, which is what we call ourselves now.

Another challenge was asking for money, because there’s never enough money. We needed to make our case strong enough so that state legislators would not only see the benefit of our program but would be willing to prioritize putting money into it. The strength of our argument was being able to demonstrate the positive impact that parent advocacy has on children: driving home that helping parents is helping children and that children do better when they’re with their parents. We also showed how much money was saved from keeping children who didn’t need to be in foster care out of foster care. Arguing for how the bill could help children *and* how the state could save money convinced legislators that it was worth funding.

***Read*** [***bill SB5486***](https://partnersforourchildren.org/policy/bill-tracker/sb-5486-relating-creating-parents-parents-program) ***that expanded the P4P program statewide.***

***Read some of the letters of support for the P4P program here. [[STILL TO BE SELECTED.]]***

***Learn more about the*** [***Children’s Home Society***](https://www.childrenshomesociety.org) ***and the*** [***P4P program***](https://www.wacita.org/parents-for-parents-education-and-engagement-for-parents-in-dependency/)***.***

***Since the passage of the bill, a third long-term evaluation study, conducted by the Center for Capacity in Courts of Nevada in 2020, found that 70% of parents who participated in a P4P Dependency 101 class reunified with their children, compared to 53% of parents who did not. For parents who attended Dependency 101 and received additional mentoring, reunification rates increased to 79%. The program also led to a 13% decrease in termination of parental rights. Read the most recent evaluation of P4P conducted in 2020 by the University of Nevada and the Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for Court*** [***here***](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56b0d6d4e707eb68892b71c1/t/5e1d001e44a61407bc11f187/1578958880190/P4POutcomesReport.pdf)***.***

[***Read more***](https://toolkit.parentadvocacy.net/topic/research-and-evaluation/) ***about the most recent research on P4P in IPAN’s Toolkit for Transformation.***

***Along with the P4P program, Washington state is also home to the Washington State Parent Ally Committee, which brings together system-affected parents from all around the state to work for policy changes that they believe are critical to protecting families. The committee was originally created as part of Children’s Home Society of Washington and is today an independent organization. You can read more about the*** [***Washington State Parent Ally Committee***](https://amarafamily.org/initiatives/parent-allies/) ***on its website or read an*** [***interview***](https://toolkit.parentadvocacy.net/topic/legislative-advocacy/) ***with its original parent lead, Alise Morrissey, who also led the effort to take P4P statewide, in IPAN’s Toolkit for Transformation.***

***Read a tip sheet by Heather Cantamessa about creating parent-led legislative advocacy efforts or starting an organization like the Washington State Parent Ally Committee. [See Attached.]***

**New York City & The Parent Advocate Initiative**

**Formalizing the Role of Parent Advocates**

In 2006, there were only roughly 25 parent advocates working in 15 child welfare agencies in New York City. Those advocates had received six months of advocacy training by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), one of the first child welfare parent advocacy organizations in the world, but many more advocates were leaving CWOP’s training program than were finding work as advocates.

The city’s new child welfare commissioner, John Mattingly, was convinced by the work and lobbying of CWOP and the city’s growing parent advocacy movement that parent advocates had a vital role to play in the city’s child welfare system and he began working with CWOP to increase the number of advocates working in child welfare agencies that contracted with the city. That collaboration led to the creation, in the fall of 2008, of the Parent Advocate Initiative (PAI), which was funded by the Child Welfare Fund, a private foundation that provided the seed money that allowed for the creation of many early child welfare parent advocacy efforts in New York City. The PAI brought together the city and state child welfare agencies, nonprofit child welfare agencies contracted with the city, and foundations with the aim of increasing the hiring of parent advocates.

After an 18-month process, the state Office of Children and Family Services, working in collaboration with the PAI, finalized the draft of a [regulation (10-OCFS-INF-09)](http://onlineresources.wnylc.net/pb/docs/10-ocfs-inf-09.pdf) that formalized and institutionalized the role of parent advocates in non-profit child welfare agencies. The regulation became effective on August 11, 2010, and for the first time, a definition of parent advocate was added to New York’s policy directive. The regulation also allowed a limited number of hours that parent advocates spent with their clients to be counted toward agencies’ required casework contact hours.

Largely as a result of that regulation, by 2011, the number of parent advocates working in child welfare agencies in New York City increased to 50, while another 50 parent advocates found work in other parts of the child welfare system. The success of parent advocacy in New York City also promoted the use of parent advocates in other parts of the country, including Kentucky, Michigan, Washington State, Iowa, and California. This expansion was supported and promoted in large part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, one of the largest private child welfare reform-focused foundations in the country.

Read the regulation [here](http://onlineresources.wnylc.net/pb/docs/10-ocfs-inf-09.pdf).

**The Early Challenges of Parent Advocates**

Although [regulation (10-OCFS-INF-09)](http://onlineresources.wnylc.net/pb/docs/10-ocfs-inf-09.pdf) institutionalized the role of parent advocates, integrating them into agencies wasn’t easy. Agencies needed to come to an agreement of the parent advocate’s role and how parent advocates would fit into the agency’s operations. Often, upper management was receptive of parent advocates but at least initially, many supervisors, case managers and case planners were wary of the impact parent advocates would have on the case and their own relationship with parents and were skeptical of the initiative.

To learn more about the struggles and successes of parent advocates after the passage of the state regulation that institutionalized parent advocacy in child welfare in New York City, watch a recording of a panel of parent advocates talking about their experiences. See Part 1 [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_mdtGrpWxY) and Part 2 [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EJHnIguwx0).

**The Challenges Continue**

A 2019 Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) [evaluation report](https://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ACS-PA-Initiative-Evaluation-Report-1.31.2019.pdf) found that parent advocates provide both emotional support and information to parents that is crucial in helping parents navigate the child welfare system, and that parent advocacy in New York City contributed to reduced foster care placements between 2013 to 2016. Often, upper management was receptive of parent advocates but many supervisors, case managers and case planners were wary of the impact parent advocates would have on cases and their own relationship with parents and were skeptical of the initiative.

To learn more about the struggles and successes of parent advocates after the passage of the PAI, watch a recording of a panel of parent advocates talking about their experiences. See Part 1 [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_mdtGrpWxY) and Part 2 [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EJHnIguwx0).

**The Challenges Continue**

Today there are roughly 150 parent advocates with lived experience working at foster care agencies through the city. At any given time there are also between 30 and 60 parent advocates working for two agencies that contract with the city to have parent advocates at initial child safety conferences to support parents when the critical decision is made whether to keep children at home, place them with relatives, or place them in stranger foster homes. Although the number of conferences attended by parent advocates was artificially depressed by Covid, on average, parent advocates attend roughly 5-6,000 initial child safety conferences a year. A 2019 Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) [evaluation report](https://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ACS-PA-Initiative-Evaluation-Report-1.31.2019.pdf) found that parent advocates provide both emotional support and information to parents that is crucial in helping parents navigate the child welfare system, and that parent advocacy in New York City contributed to reduced foster care placements between 2013 to 2016.

Despite these benefits, more than 10 years after the initial success of the Parent Advocate Initiative, many agencies in NYC have none or only one parent advocate to serve hundreds of families that could potentially benefit from such support. Since the promulgated regulation first increased parent advocacy in NYC, the number of parent advocates working at agencies that contract with the city to run foster homes and other child welfare programs has remained largely stagnant. Over the years, agencies that hired parent advocates have lost funding for the position or chose not to maintain parent advocates on staff for other reasons.[[2]](#footnote-2)

One of the major barriers to expanding the role of parent advocates is funding. One proposed reform would be for child welfare agency contracts with the city’s Administration for Children’s Services to specifically stipulate more funding for and hiring of parent advocates.

A second reform, which has been piloted and evaluated, would be to allow parent advocates who support parents at Initial Child Safety Conferences to have ongoing contact with parents during the course of an investigation.

**Read ACS’s evaluation report with recommendations for improvements** [**here**](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/initiatives/2019/LalayantsCitywideStudy.pdf)**.**

**Read** [**a study that looks at the impact of the Enhanced Family Conferencing Initiative**](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/initiatives/2020/EFCIFinalReport.pdf)**, a pilot project that increased the support that parent advocates could provide parents over the course of an investigation.**

**Read** [**a 2021 study**](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740921003170) **of the impact of parent advocates in Initial Child Safety Conferences in New York City.**

1. Interview conducted on July 15, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Keyna Franklin & Aleesa Mann, “Parent Advocates Help Keep Families Together, So Why Aren’t More of Them Working in NYC?” (New York: [Rise Magazine](https://www.risemagazine.org/2019/08/parent-advocates-help-keep-families-together-so-why-arent-more-of-them-working-in-nyc/), August 7, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)