August 12, 2014

Heather Cantamessa, Veteran Parent

Kevin Quigley

Secretary, Washington State DSHS

PO Box 45010

Olympia, WA 98504-5130

Dear Secretary Quigley:

I am a Veteran Parent of the child welfare system who had my children removed from my custody. I resolved the issues that brought Child Protective Services into my family’s life, reunified with my children, and had my case closed. I know the pain and consequences one must endure while being involved in an out-of-home dependency case. It is a confusing, shameful, and hopeless feeling that one would not know unless they had been through it themselves. I do not want anyone to have to go through this process alone, like I did.

This adversity has inspired me to devote much of my time reaching out to individuals struggling to resolve their issues so they can be the parent their child needs. I do this work in many ways, but the most effective and efficient way is through the Spokane County Parents for Parents Program. I have coordinated this program since it was implemented in February of 2013. This amazing program follows the King County model that has been researched and found to effectively enhance parent engagement in court ordered services through peer to peer mentoring. I and other trained Veteran Parent volunteers meet with parents in the juvenile court lobby when they attend a court hearing. To date, we have met over eight hundred parents in the lobby waiting for a hearing.

As a Veteran Parent, I naturally make a connection with a dependency involved parent. They look at my accomplishment as an example of hope and are more willing to accept my offer to help them

work toward being a safe parent. Together we can access the support, information, and resources that they will use to overcome the many obstacles and barriers faced in their hardship. We Veteran Parents also invite the parent to the Parents for Parents HOPE class. This class is designed to assist parents in successfully navigating the court dependency system. We get wonderful feedback from the parents that attend the class. Many parents that have attended the HOPE class and received Veteran Parent support say that they wish there would have been a class established when they had a previous dependency case. I know what they are saying is true because if I would have had the information and support I needed; I would have made better decisions.

We also provide ongoing support to parents during hearings and by telephone. The dependency involved parents trust us and are inspired and motivated because we demonstrate real life success in action. Our involvement is like the fertilizer for the seed. We prepare and inspire parents toward successful and early engagement in services.

I am asking you to please reinstate the Parents for Parents Program funding across the state. I believe this program saves the state money by reunifying families sooner, and if you give the program more time I’m sure we can prove it by becoming an Evidenced Based Practice. We are very efficient with the funds we are allotted. Please support us in our mission to help parents learn from their mistakes rather than live in them.

Sincerely,

Heather Cantamessa

CC: Senator Andy Billig

Senator Jim Hardgrove

Representative Marcus Riccelli

Assistant Secretary Jennifer Strus, DCFS

Connie Lambert-Eckle, Regional Administrator, DCFS

Nancy Roberts-Brown, Catalyst for Kids