

**The Parent Advocate Initiative: Promoting Parent Advocates in Foster Care
Evaluation Report**

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Introduction

The Parent Advocate Initiative (PAI) is a program designed to promote the use of parent advocates in the delivery of foster care services in New York City.¹ PAI parent advocates are individuals with their own prior involvement in the child welfare system who are trained to assist parents whose children are in foster care. Parent advocates offer a perspective to parents that differs from that of social workers and other professionals. The parent advocate works to increase the client's knowledge of how the system works and ensures that the client's rights are being protected. Their unique role as mentor and advocate is assumed to help increase the parent's level of engagement in case planning and decision-making. Parent advocates with prior system history have been found to be especially beneficial in that their experience as former clients provides an authenticity of voice that promotes trust (Cohen & Canaan, 2006).

Another important function tied to the parent advocate role is that of liaison between the family and other professionals. The advocates are expected to facilitate communication in a way that allows for staff to be better attuned to the unique needs of the family. Peer-to-peer programs like the PAI are based on the idea that parent advocates help shift staff attitudes toward viewing the unique needs and strengths of the family in balance with child safety (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). Finally, advocates are often able to provide community resources to the family that other professionals cannot because they are working within and outside the local network of services and other local social network supports (Budde & Schene, 2004). Research suggests the benefits of the intervention are equated with improved rates of reunification (Anthony, Berrick, Cohen, & Wilder, 2009; Layzer et al., 2001; Singer et. al., 1999).

The two-year PAI program builds on the already growing presence of parent advocates who work alongside neighborhood coalitions, social service agencies, and New York City Children's

¹ The PAI lead partners and funders include: Fund for Social Change, New York Children's Services, New York State Office of Children and Family Services, Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, Child Welfare Organizing Project, Child Welfare Fund, Joseph LeRoy and Ann C. Warner Fund, JPMorgan/Ira W. DeCamp Foundation, New Yorkers For Children, Casey Family Programs/Marguerite Casey Foundation and The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Services (ACS) in support of system-involved families.² Although foster care agencies in New York City have employed parent advocates in the past, the PAI represents the first time the work has been linked to a formal training model and technical assistance network. It is also the first instance in which the Child Welfare Organizing Project's "Parent Leadership Curriculum," which has trained more than eighty individuals to be parent advocates, has been offered in conjunction with an agency-based internship program.

In 2009, the PAI Steering Committee awarded competitive grants to six foster care agencies: Children's Aid Society, Forestdale, Episcopal Social Services, Lutheran Social Services, New Alternatives for Children and New York Foundling. Each agency nominated one or two persons whom the agency would co-sponsor to participate, leading to a total of eight parent advocates (PAs). The actual hiring of the candidates was preceded by a rigorous 6-month training period comprised of three components: 1) classroom-based learning sessions; 2) learning activities outside the classroom, and; 3) internships at the sponsoring foster care agencies. In the first year, the PAI also aimed to develop a parent advocate membership network designed to provide the advocates with a community of support and resources to do their work effectively. Technical assistance structures were also created to provide ongoing support to CWOP, the PAs, and the participating agencies. Support was provided by the PAI Steering Committee, Fund for Social Change staff who coordinate the project, and the Council on Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFFCA).

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago was asked by the PAI Steering Committee to conduct an evaluation of the first year training component. The evaluation focused on the two primary goals of the training: 1) to prepare the PAs with the skills and knowledge they need in order to work with families in the post-training period, and; 2) to promote the successful integration of the PAs into agency practice and culture. This report presents findings from the study.

Study results are presented in three main sections. The first section introduces the PAs and explains their motivations for participating in the PAI. The second section is focused on the learning process. We address issues related to the fidelity of the model, such as whether training activities succeeded in conveying the ideas and skills intended. We also address the effectiveness

² In recent years, the presence of parent advocates in the child welfare system has been rising steadily. In New York City, parent advocates are presently being sponsored by ACS and contract agencies to support families in family team meetings, court hearings, and visits between biological parents and their children.

of the training as it relates to the PAs' comprehension and retention of the material and the appropriateness of the curriculum to prepare them for the work. The third part of the evaluation focuses on the adoption of the PAI model in the workplace. The study aimed to understand the quality of agency-PA communication and collaboration in anticipation of the post-training implementation period. We also describe the degree to which adequate supports are in place to manage and sustain the process of integration.

Sources of data

Several data methods were used to gain a diverse set of perspectives from the PAs, foster care agency staff, and other key stakeholders. Toward the end of the training period, all of the eight PAs participated in a focus group followed by a short survey. An additional parent advocate who was a part of the PAI training cohort and employed by a New York City foster care agency also participated in the focus group and survey.³ The main purpose of the focus group was to obtain the group's feedback on the quality and effectiveness of the training. The survey assessed their mastery of key ideas imparted in the classroom part of the training. The evaluators also conducted follow up interviews with five of the PAI PAs that explored some of the topics raised in the focus group in greater depth.

In order to understand the agency perspective, we also conducted interviews with supervisory staff from five of the seven participating agencies who had direct knowledge of the PAs' work.⁴ We did not try to match the sample of supervisors to the PAs interviewed so as to ensure the largest pool of volunteers possible. In addition, we held ongoing phone interviews with five persons recruited as "key informants" in order to obtain a fuller picture of the day-to-day workings of the project. Key informants were recruited based on their knowledge of the curriculum and included CWOP staff, PAI leaders and the PAI network coordinator. In addition, the evaluators examined curricular materials and other relevant documents.

Program Adjustments

³ Two additional PAs participated in the CWOP training who were not officially part of the PAI program. The PAs were sponsored by two other foster care agencies to take part in the CWOP training but the agencies were not grantees of the program and therefore were not accountable to the PAI.

⁴ Supervisors at all of the six agencies were invited to participate. Five staff volunteered to take part in the study.

Due to unanticipated delays in the selection and hiring of candidates, the training period started in July 2009 but ended in February 2010, two months later than expected. In addition, the PAI network as planned was not put into place until March 2010, which meant that the Year 1 evaluation could not include an examination of how the PAs make use of its resources. All eight PAs completed the CWOP curriculum. However, two are no longer stationed at their respective agencies.⁵

The initial design of the program called for the PAs to hold internships that coincided with classroom activities and preceded their official hiring. In actuality, three of the eight PAs were hired by their agencies to come on as full-time staff prior to the completion of the training program. Two others were hired part-time and three were interns. Our presentation of findings considers the staff-intern distinction where relevant.

Findings

We present findings organized into two main sections. The first describes what the PAs learned throughout the various components of the training. The second section focuses on matters related to the integration of the PAs at their respective agencies. A profile of the PAI parent advocates precedes our discussion of the main research findings.

Introducing the PAs

Five of the agencies sponsored one trainee; the sixth sponsored two for a total of eight PAs. All of the PAs are female.⁶ Their ages span from the twenties through the fifties. Their educational histories vary: some have no college experience, others were attending school at the time of the training, and others have completed college. There is also variation in their level of work experience. For some of the PAs, the PAI represented the first career opportunity following several years of unemployment. For others the program allowed them to build on their past experiences working in social service agencies.⁷ The majority of the PAs were managing

⁵ The two PAI agencies that lost their PAs have since hired new PAs who had attended past modules of the CWOP training. As a result, the number of PAI PAs in the second year continues to be eight.

⁶ Toward the end of the training, one of the PAI foster care agencies hired a male parent advocate who had graduated a past cycle of the CWOP training. Although he did not enter the PAI at the outset, he is now considered one of the PAs in the program.

⁷ For example, one of the PAs held a Bachelors degree in Social Work from a local college and had worked for several years as a housing advocate employed by the New York City Department of Homeless Services.

responsibilities outside of the training related to childcare, work (for those full-time at the agencies), and school.

The PAs spoke of the excitement they experienced when they received the call from the agency inviting them to be a parent advocate. When asked what had motivated them to participate in the PAI and what they were hoping to gain from the experience the PAs gave similar answers. A few PAs claimed the call had come at a time when they were hoping to jumpstart a new career or go back to school. All of the PAs viewed the opportunity as fulfilling their desire to help others and to turn the difficulties of their past into an opportunity for personal and professional growth. All expressed a deep commitment to the mission of project, which many attributed to the wish to give other families the support they “wished they had” when their children were in care. In one interview, a PA spoke of her firsthand experience with a parent advocate who had been assigned to her case and who played a crucial role in the reunification of her family. The PAI gave her the opportunity to “do for someone else what was done for me.”

The PAs were nominated by their agencies because agency staff believed they possess the qualities needed to fulfill the parent advocate role. The interviews suggest that the PAs have strong leadership qualities that were recognized by agency staff. When asked their impressions of why they were chosen, some of the PAs claimed that they are able to project strong communication and interpersonal skills and have a natural ability to advocate for themselves and others. In one example, the PA stated, “the agency noticed that I never let decisions be made without my involvement. I was always engaged. I never missed a visit or an appointment.” The PAs view the PAI as a chance to hone their strengths for the purpose of helping other families move toward reunification.

Training and preparation

The PAI curriculum includes activities that take place both inside and outside of the classroom. In the classroom, CWOP staff emphasized the knowledge and competencies needed for parent advocates to effectively work with families. The PAs learned such topics as interpersonal and conflict resolution skills, the basics of community organizing, and how to navigate the family court and foster care systems. Curricular activities outside of the classroom were aimed at preparing the advocates to conduct their work in the larger policy and service arenas. For example, the advocates attended public hearings, met with policy-making entities, and attended

CWOP-hosted parent support and self-help groups. The third aspect of the model included internships at the PAs' respective agencies where they were to be hired upon completion of the training. In the internship they were expected to build relationships with staff, learn agency practices and procedures, and begin to work directly with families.

In this section we address the following questions: Did the training succeed in imparting the ideas intended by the PAI model? How well did the training prepare the PAs to carry out their work with families? Findings are divided into three sections which correspond to the three parts of the curriculum: classroom learning, non-classroom events, and internship activities.

Classroom learning

The classroom portion of CWOP's "Parent Leadership Curriculum" is covered in six two-hour sessions. The curriculum is designed to provide the PAs with a clear understanding of how the child welfare system works, its history, and the role of the parent advocate within foster care agencies. Topics covered include:

- How to navigate the Family Court and Child Welfare Systems
- History of the child welfare system in New York City
- Communication skills
- Resources for preserving families
- Writing skills
- Collaboration building
- Leadership skills

In the focus group, all of the PAs claimed that the scope and quality of the material had exceeded their expectations. The PAs were unanimously positive about the relevance of class sessions to their work with families. When asked to identify the topics that were most valuable, several of the PAs talked about information pertaining to family court proceedings and child welfare regulations and laws. They also found that the communication skills segment of the training was particularly helpful. For example, several reported that the training had taught them "how to listen to others" and "have distance" from parents in situations that may be emotionally difficult to manage.

In the focus group and in interviews, the PAs could not name any topics that they believed should have been added to the classroom curriculum based on their experiences working with families. Nor did they find the material difficult to comprehend. However, several claimed they would have preferred having more time to absorb the ideas. Two of the PAs interviewed claimed that the two-hour sessions often seemed to compress large amounts of material that warranted more discussion. All of the PAs expressed the desire to have more repetition regarding the “acronyms” they were required to learn.⁸ They also claimed that it was difficult to retain information about the various kinds of legal proceedings and what happens throughout the course of a case. Survey results confirmed that the PAs had difficulty retaining legal terms and laws that require rote memorization (e.g. dispositional hearing, Adoption and Safe Families Act (AFSA), and 1028 hearing). Only four of the nine PAs who participated in the focus group and survey answered the definitional questions accurately.

Weak term retention was a concern for the PAs in that they feel it is their duty to be fully prepared in the face of parents. At the same time, the PAs claimed that they rarely found themselves in instances where they felt unable to identify or access the information they needed, and many believe that their mastery of the universe of terms will come with experience. The PAs also stated that they feel well supported by CWOP staff in the event that they need to clarify a piece of information.

The PAs’ survey responses related to describing the PA role reflected greater accuracy and confidence. For example, six of the nine participants were able to describe strategies for improving communication in Family Team Conferences and parents’ options for legal representation that can be relayed to the parent.⁹ They were also able to name obstacles to reunification and how PAs might help remove the obstacle. The remaining three PAs were able to answer some portion of these questions. The results imply that the PAs had some difficulty recalling rote technical terms but most of them have a clear foundation of how parent advocates provide support and advocacy to families.

Learning outside the classroom

⁸ These are the technical terms related to agency protocols or legal regulations.

⁹ Family Team Conferences are meetings where agency staff, the family, and foster family come together to discuss challenges and to develop an action plan.

In addition to classroom sessions, the PAs participated in a wide variety of supplemental trainings, workshops, and leadership-building activities. Each month a calendar outlining upcoming events and activities at various social service and legal organizations around the City was distributed to the PAs. Examples of trainings and events include:

- Individual Education Plans (IEP) preparation workshop
- Training on ACS' Improved Outcomes for Children conferencing model
- How to advocate for parents with mental illness
- The effects of domestic violence on children
- Visit to Hunter College Social Work class
- Annual National Juvenile and Family Law Conference

A total of 35 workshops and other events were offered throughout the training. In addition, the PAs were invited to participate in a weekly parent support group at CWOP and to participate in other events in which CWOP is a collaborator, such as ACS' Parent Advisory Workgroup meetings, and Rise Magazine workshops and editorial board meetings. They also learned of the existence of a wide variety of advocacy and service organizations (e.g. Center for Family Representation, New York County Lawyers' Association, Advocates for Children) across the city that they could draw on in their future work with families. The PAs were enthusiastic about the opportunity to expand their knowledge across so many topics and contexts. Some activities stood out as particularly meaningful, such as the workshop on Racial Disproportionality offered by the People's Institute of Survival and Beyond and the group's visit to the United States Court of Appeals to observe a trial. The weekly CWOP Support Group was also regarded as an important aspect of their education. It was in the Support Group where they got the opportunity to build relationships with parents and to understand how parent advocates can provide emotional and practical supports in both group settings and when working one-on-one with a family.

However, attendance at the voluntary activities was sporadic. In the focus group and in interviews the PAs described challenges that hindered their consistent adherence to the schedule. Some had childcare responsibilities that limited their availability, particularly to attend those held in the late afternoon and evenings. At times the calendar conflicted with school obligations, or with an event at the agency, such as a meeting with a parent or staff meeting. Sometimes it was the distance to an event, which could be located more than an hour away from the agency that made their participation difficult. To the supervisory staff and PAs, scheduling conflicts were

difficult to avoid because the event calendar was often changed on short notice. Supervisors claimed it would have been helpful to have been given the monthly calendar several weeks in advance and to be notified of any changes beforehand. The PAs also explained that they could always rely on CWOP to “fill them in” on what they had missed, and that they could expect there to be another chance to attend the event in the future.

Internships and agency work

Although the PA’s status (intern versus staff) varied as did the number of hours per week they were spending at their agencies, work tasks were similar. All had significant contact with families and with case planning staff, though those employed by their agency had more.¹⁰ Work tasks included:

- Attend home visits
- Attend Family Team Conferences
- Accompany parents to court, to medical visits, and to other agencies to secure benefits (e.g. housing, Medicaid)
- Attend visits between parents and their biological children
- Attend staff meetings
- Attend Community Partnership meetings¹¹

The PAs interacted with parents in home visits and agency appointments. Contacts also occurred outside of formal meetings. For example, a PA could meet with the parent at the agency before or after a scheduled meeting or over the phone. Interactions could take place with other staff (as in a Family Team Conference) or one-on-one in private.

In interactions, the PAs’ role is multifaceted and depends on the needs of the parent. They provide emotional support; they offer information to the parent about what steps can be taken to move the case forward; they provide referrals; they advocate in court; they help the parent manage appointments, and; they work to ensure that the agency is addressing the needs of the

¹⁰ For those PAs working full-time, contact with families was regular. Interns were also given opportunities to work directly with the parents, though the amount of contact they had with families varied.

¹¹ Community Partnerships are ACS-funded coalitions comprised of foster care and preventive agencies, community based organizations, and ACS. Monthly meetings are held to discuss how the coalition is working to improve service quality and utilization in the community in which stakeholders reside.

family and that communication is clear on both sides. Both the PAs and agency staff claimed that the PAs were at ease working with the parents and were able to carry out the various parts of their advocacy role without confusion or difficulty. The classroom portion of the curriculum seemed to provide the PAs with the framework needed to enact their role effectively.

In terms of case assignment, the majority of the PAs are assigned a set caseload. In most instances a formal referral is submitted to the PA's supervisor by the case planner who holds direct case management responsibility. However, some PAs interact with families not formally referred. For example, at times when they are not engaged with a particular case, they sit in the waiting area of the agency to greet other parents and assess the family's level of need. In one unique case, the PA chooses the families she would like to work with upon studying cases in Connections, New York State's administrative data system of record. Whether the PA provides support to a small or large segment of families at the agency depends on the size of the agency and where the PAs are deployed. In one agency with five regional offices, two PAs are covering four of the five areas. In another, the PA is assigned to work within one of several staffing units.

The PAs and staff were adamant that the internship/work component of the training was a key part of the learning process. It offered the PAs the opportunity to apply what they were learning in the classroom and to understand how they fit into the organization. As one PA put it, "the most important part is learning how to work with families and transitioning to being not a client but a coworker."

As discussed above, the PAs found what they were learning in the classroom to be fundamental to their ability to advocate for parents and to help parents understand how the system works. The concurrent parts of the training were especially complementary in that the PAs learned how to manage their unique role – as both agency insiders and outsiders – while drawing on the support of their peers and CWOP staff. As we describe in later sections, the classroom-internship combination provided the PAs and the agencies a network of supports in which to help negotiate issues arising at the agency.

Supervisory staff were asked to describe how well the CWOP curriculum seemed to address the learning needs of the PAs. Generally, they claimed that the curriculum had helped to establish a foundation of knowledge essential to the work. However, the staff's familiarity with the classroom curriculum was limited. Some supervisors interviewed claimed that they would have

liked to have more information about the training so as to understand what the PAs “should” be learning. Looking back on the program design, CWOP and agency staff agreed that the training process would have been improved by greater agency-CWOP communication. By the end of the training, stakeholders had come to realize that what was being learned in the classroom could have been more directly reinforced during supervision, and vice versa.

“Clinical skills” was the only topic area mentioned by the supervisors as needing more attention in the training. This perspective reflects further the fact that staff were unclear about what kinds of skills were being covered in training activities outside of the agency.

Integration

In addition to learning essential skills and knowledge, the PAs’ success rests on the degree to which they are able to integrate into the practice and culture of their new workplaces. For this reason, the PAs’ assimilation into their host organizations was a topic of important focus for the evaluation. The classroom aspects of the training are difficult to separate from what the PAs were learning in contact with families and staff. Although these learning processes were highly complementary, we address the PAs’ experience inside the agency environment separately.

As we came to learn, the training period was one of intense transition. Agency staff (e.g. supervisors and case planners) were figuring out how to incorporate a new model of practice into their everyday work at the same time the PAs were adjusting to their new professional role. Drawing on the PAI mission and theory of change, we looked for specific conditions to assess how far the program had come to achieving real integration:

1. Expectations are mutual. PAs and agency staff define what parent advocates do and how they fit into the work in compatible ways.
2. The tasks carried out by the parent advocate match their role.
3. Agency staff-PA relationships are marked by trust, respect and cooperation.
4. Supports are in place to resolve conflicts.
5. PAs have the skills they need to do the work.

In the sections below we describe in greater detail how the parent advocate role was enacted and defined throughout the course of the training period as it relates to the implementation of the PAI model at the agencies.

The role defined

When asked to describe the PA role, PAs and supervisors alike had very clear and consistent answers. The role is dynamic and has multiple dimensions, including:

- to “empower” parents by informing them of their rights and helping them to navigate complex systems
- to “inspire and give hope”
- to “give parents a voice”
- to promote better communication between the parent and the agency
- to serve as role models
- to hold parents accountable
- to hold agency staff accountable
- to provide resources/referrals
- to provide emotional support
- to provide support to parents in managing required action tasks and appointments

Role expectations were consistent with those expressed in the Parent Leadership Curriculum and were also well aligned with the kinds of tasks the PAs performed at the agencies. In working with families at the agency, in court, and in their homes, the PAs provided advocacy and support in multiple ways.

The supervisors were adamant that the PAs are making a significant contribution to their agency’s ability to promote stable, healthy families. In their view, the goals of the PAI and the broader mission of the agency were perfectly aligned. For the supervisors, the most important factor behind the PAs’ impact is their status as advocates working outside the traditional role of the case planner. Staff claimed that parents view the PAs “as an ally.” Parents are “more responsive” to the PAs than to case planners whom some parents relate to as “someone who took my children.” Two supervisory staff used the term “bridge” to describe the ability of the PA to improve communication between the agency and the parent vis-à-vis their role as trusted confidant, mentor, and mediator.

To the supervisors and the PAs alike, it is the PAs’ status as peers – persons whom the parent feels he or she can identify with – which makes their work so authentic. Other staff may be able

to provide parents with the same information, but may not be seen as a trustworthy or legitimate source. Interestingly, the PAs spoke of their unique rapport with parents as being two-sided. The PA's peer status seems to encourage greater trust and openness on the part of the parent, who may have conflicted or fearful feelings toward the agency. At the same time, the PAs feel that their unique position enables them greater license than other staff to be honest or direct with the parent once trust is in place. As one PA put it, "I can say to mom what others can't." She talked about her frequent need to be frank with parents about "not doing what they need to do for the sake of the children." Another PA offered that some parents she works with "are not ready to open up" but that the relationship is one in which, "you can earn their trust because you're real with them." She said, "I tell them, 'don't feed me the stuff you feed the caseworker' but sometimes they're not ready."

The PAs disclose information about their past involvement in the system on a discretionary basis. In general, they will invoke their past in instances where it would make a difference to their ability to help a parent. Some of the PAs talked about the value of the disclosure to inspire hope in the parent. As one PA put it, "they say, 'you mean this agency gave you a job? Would they give me a job?'" In her view, being a PA allows her to be a role model of perseverance and survival to families who are struggling through extremely difficult circumstances. It was also clear that the parents to whom a PA is assigned are receiving a host of additional supports from the PAs that the agency is otherwise not able to provide (or not able to provide consistently), such as accompanying parents to appointments, guiding them through service applications, and advocating on behalf of the parent at family court proceedings. Supervisory staff also talked about the unique service referrals PAs were able to offer to families, which they had cultivated through their experiences at CWOP. For the staff it was obvious how the PA role complements what other agency staff do with parents and how their work can be expected to lead to higher rates of reunification at the agency. All of the staff claimed that their agency would benefit from an expansion of the program in the event that more agency funds were to become available.

Problematic tasks

Although the groups interviewed were clear about the PA role and the task activities well reflect the PAI model, tensions among the PAs and agency staff do exist. Some of the PAs felt that their role was not well enough defined, which led them to feel disrespected. Specifically, four of the PAs expressed the belief that they were being asked to take on responsibilities outside of the

purview of their role, such as to manage safety assessments and administrative tasks. The PAs found this offensive because they perceived the agency as “using” them to cover tasks unrelated to what a parent advocate does and not allotting them the appropriate amount of time to spend with families.

For the advocates who raised the issue, their frustration seemed to reflect the feeling that they were not being respected by their colleagues, specifically case planners. Certain tasks seemed to indicate to the PAs that they were doing the work of case aides: persons who support case management activities but who typically lack decision-making authority. For example, some PAs spoke of their disappointment when asked to submit progress notes that did not indicate authorship. Though this was largely an issue of access to Connections that would later be put into place, there was a sense among these individuals that they were not being treated as equals on par with other staff.

By and large the supervisors claimed that the boundaries were clear regarding how a parent advocate differs from a case aide (e.g. case aides do not act as advocates or peer supports). However, they did acknowledge that not all case planning staff were clear about the role, despite informational meetings aimed at raising awareness about the PAI program. The supervisors regard any role confusion among staff as a reflection of a learning curve that would be resolved over time. One supervisor offered her impression that some case planners are inclined “to be territorial” about their contact with families as a possible explanation for why the PAs may sense resistance from staff. The supervisors’ ability to speak to the case planners’ perspective was limited in that they do not supervise case management staff directly.¹²

It is important to note that the frustration over being asked to execute certain tasks was not shared by all of the PAs. It is unclear to what extent their level of job satisfaction was related to their work status (e.g. as interns or employees), or agency culture, or other individual attributes. Within the group of five “satisfied” PAs, many expressed the sentiment that, as members of an agency team, all aspects of casework fall under the rubric of the PA role. They viewed the range of tasks that case aides and case planners do (such as home safety assessments or supervising family visits) as indistinguishable from their role because all family contacts provide an opportunity to give support. This claim resonates with the perspective offered by one of the

¹² The supervisors interviewed supervise the PAs and other supervisors.

supervisors: “We’re all part of the same team with the same goal of helping families. If a family needs a home visit and someone is out, someone else has to pick up the work.”

In another example of tensions surrounding certain tasks, three PAs were frustrated by the tendency among agency staff to assign them to “difficult cases.” Difficult cases may refer to parents who are not compliant with agency requirements or who refuse to communicate with agency staff. Many of the PAs agreed that their impact was greatest among certain types of case situations and conditions. The PAs who were frustrated by the targeting of family assignments felt that it was unfair that they could not work with a more diverse set of families. This sentiment too seemed tied to their experience of not feeling fully accepted or respected by agency staff.

As one supervisor put it, the case planner-driven referral system is useful because “some families more than others can benefit” from the PA’s involvement. Similarly, the timing of the PA’s contact with families may be targeted in order to optimize the benefit. Some PAs have recently begun sitting in on “parent-to-parent” meetings in which the parent is likely to come into contact with the agency and the foster parent for the first time. The rationale for the PA being at the meeting is that it represents the agency’s first chance to establish a relationship with the parent at a moment when parents are likely to be undergoing feelings of intense shock and upset.

Trust and respect

Underneath the mistrust some of the PAs express are real challenges. Natural staff hierarchies can affect an employee’s comfort level within a new work environment. As past clients of the agency, such divisions can have a bigger impact. The PAs are working alongside staff who have different work histories, credentials, and salaries. Many are coping with the normal insecurities that may arise as a result of entering the workforce after many years of not working. All of the PAs mentioned this as a concern in that they felt to some extent that case planning staff at the agency perceived them to be “like the clients” or “not professional.” Overall, feelings toward supervisory staff were more trusting and positive than toward the case planning staff.

Still, all of the PAs shared the belief that agency staff were experiencing a transition and it would take time for them to all fully accept the PA role. When talking about case planning staff the PAs used language that ranged from alienated to sympathetic. Some PAs claimed that the PAI was new enough that they would have to “earn their stripes” to be fully integrated into staff routines.

The majority of PAs viewed staff acceptance as something that would develop over time and this claim was corroborated by the supervisors. All of the supervisors and several of the PAs claimed to have recently noticed a shift in the staff's appreciation of the PA's work evidenced by the steady rise in referrals. As more staff came into frequent contact with the PAs and observed how families can benefit and how the PAs can help move the case forward, their desire to work with the PAs was growing.

The PAs were also asked to describe their impressions of ACS staff. Thus far, interactions with ACS staff have been limited to Family Team Conferences and court hearings. Overall, attitudes toward ACS staff were very positive. In the focus group, all participants shared the belief that ACS was very supportive of the parent advocate role. "They want us to be there," was the general feeling expressed by the group.

Role conflicts and support

The PAs' belief that some staff view them "like the family" gets at another tension that could be expected to arise when one performs an advocacy role within a traditional child welfare agency setting. Staff and the PAs alike expressed the belief that some case planners worry that the PAs are going to undermine the agency's authority. To many of the PAs, to "earn one's stripes" means to prove that they are not on any one particular side but aim to collaborate with a team of stakeholders for the purpose of promoting child safety and permanency.

This theme touches on another aspect of the parent advocate role that can be challenging for the PAs to negotiate. Some of the PAs described situations in which they perceived case planning staff to be acting in ways harmful to the parent or child or in violation of their rights. In each example the PA was able to talk the issues through with her supervisor. Although such instances are not frequent and do not define the work, the potential for disagreement always exists. In a few instances, CWOP and Fund for Social Change staff were consulted about a disagreement pertaining to work requirements and benefits. All in all, the evaluators learned of only four disagreements that had occurred throughout the first eight months of the program. All had been aired and resolved through the collaboration of CWOP, agency staff, and PAI technical support providers.

The link to COFFCA is another example of the PAI's commitment to putting sustainable supports in place. In March, a meeting of agency supervisors, PAs, and CWOP staff was facilitated by COFFCA with the intention of discussing integration-related issues that were arising at the agencies. All participants agreed that the project would benefit from additional meetings. In the second year of the PAI, it is hoped that regular meetings will be held at COFFCA for the purpose of identifying and resolving any supports needed by the PAs and supervisor staff.

The PAs' connection to CWOP staff and the weekly Support Group at CWOP was another key resource. In general, the PAs and supervisors sounded very confident about the PAs' ability to negotiate case boundaries and to manage the sometimes delicate line between being an advocate and holding the agency accountable, while also being a team member and holding the parent accountable to case requirements. Although incidents were rare and could be managed, the issues raised point to a challenge that is an inherent aspect of the PAs' work going forward and further point to the need for there to be an existing support structure. The Support Group was a venue for the PAs to talk through issues they were having with their clients within a safe and confidential environment. They were able to ask for advice from their peers and from CWOP leaders about how to best manage a particular situation or case need.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge of the PA role is that it requires the PAs to witness situations that can trigger traumatic memories. Interviews with supervisors suggest that the PAs vary to the degree to which they are able to distance their emotional life from the situations they are working in – skills that are covered in the training curriculum, but which will remain an ongoing challenge for some if not all of the PAs going forward. Supervisors reported instances where the PA had been coping with emotional stress on account of an experience they had working with a family. Supervisors also noted the multitude of stressors the PAs were managing in their new role, such as the pressures of learning a new work environment and juggling full-time hours with childcare demands. As they work with families in crisis and try to navigate organizations not yet acclimated to their role, some of the PAs are undergoing complex transitions of their own.

The supervisors, by and large, view supervision as an essential vehicle to work through role conflicts and tensions among staff. For the PAs, their ability to call on the other peers in the training and other CWOP staff seemed very important to their feeling secure in their work. In the focus group, the PAs spoke about the important friendships that they had developed with each other and with the CWOP staff. When asked whom they would call on when they have work-

related problems the consistent answer given was “each other.” One PA stated, “we call each other whenever we need to talk about something that happened.” It is clear that the ways in which they depend on each other and on CWOP staff will continue, and will be further enhanced by the PAI network once it becomes fully active.

Conclusion

According to the PAI model, the use of parent advocates (PAs) in the delivery of foster care services yields several benefits for children and families. The theory of change posits that PAs offer a perspective and assistance to individual clients that differs from that of social workers and other professionals (e.g. advocacy-based, shared experience). In their unique position as peers, PAs are assumed to increase parental engagement in case planning, decision-making, and service utilization. PAs are also expected to ensure that agencies uphold parents’ legal rights and their obligation to provide adequate supports to families.

A second component of the theory of change looks to the relationship between family and staff behavior on the one hand, and family preservation outcomes on the other. The model posits a causal link between strong engagement, communication and advocacy and a higher likelihood of positive permanency outcomes. For example, it is assumed that families who receive the PA intervention will have higher reunification rates and shorter lengths of stay in care than families who do not.

The PAI training was designed to prepare the PAs for their subsequent work with families. The training was offered in order to 1) train the PAs in the skills and knowledge needed to exercise their role effectively, and 2) to help the PAs become integrated into the workflow of the agency. In addition, the PAI leaders, in anticipation of certain practical challenges that are inherent to the PA role, set out to create infrastructure needed to provide supports for the PAs both inside and outside the agency. To do so, the PAI built collaborative links between CWOP, the PAI network, the foster care agencies, and a governing body (the PAI Steering Committee).

In this report we present findings from the PAI training. We describe how and why the PAs came to participate in the program. We describe the content of the three curricular components and how they were implemented. We address the effectiveness of the training and the degree to which the PAs became integrated into the work at their host agencies.

The design of the PAI program leverages the commitment of the agencies to the PAI mission and draws on pre-existing ties between the PA and the agency. It offers individuals with strong leadership skills, who are deeply committed to the work, the opportunity for personal growth and employment. All parties agree there is a clear connection between what the PAs offer to parents and what parents need to be successful in moving their case forward. The link between the classroom and work components was especially useful. Coupled with their experiences at the agencies, the PAs were able to apply classroom knowledge as they became immersed in real case situations. Their connection to CWOP and to each other throughout the training provided access to much-needed supports, especially when there was a conflict occurring at the agency.

However, it is clear that the training could have benefited from increased communication between CWOP and the agency supervisors. Data also show that the PAs would have benefited from more classroom time to go over material and attend to certain topics in greater depth. Although the PAs seem to demonstrate a mastery over their advocacy role in their work with parents, there were terms they found difficult to retain, and topics they claim to have needed more time to fully absorb. It is also clear that the extensive calendar of voluntary training activities was difficult for the PAs to manage in the face of family and work obligations, particularly for those PAs who were working full-time at the agencies.

The findings suggest that the process of integration into the agency has been initiated successfully. The PAs fulfill well-defined tasks that are carried out in the routine flow of service delivery. Supervisory staff report that case referrals from other staff are steadily increasing. By the end of the training, the PAs perceived their acceptance by coworkers to be growing. At the same time, the degree to which the PAs feel respected and accepted varies. Two divergent perspectives emerge from the data. For one group (four of the nine PAs) role tensions were a salient part of how they talked about their experience. The other five PAs talked in more positive terms about their relationships with staff and did not seem concerned about the potential for conflict. It is also clear that case planners may also differ in how they view the value of PAs or define their role, a concern that may be addressed through additional training.

Still, the practical and emotional challenges that the PAs must manage are a natural part of the work and were acknowledged by all. The PAs must manage relationships with parents and agency staff simultaneously. They are working as advocates and peers as they also perform the

roles of colleague and employee. They are managing many challenges their coworkers are not, some as persons transitioning to being employed after many years of not working, or trying to navigate situations that may trigger traumatic memories. Some claim experiencing feelings of disrespect or mistrust in their new work environments.

These challenges will not cease to exist, no matter how well the PAs' efforts become integrated into the everyday practices of the agency. As the second year of the program approaches, the PAI Steering Committee and agency and CWOP leaders will need to keep an open line of communication with the PAs to ensure that they have the organizational and personal supports they need to sustain their efforts. As this report documents, all of the parties involved benefited from there being conditions for collaboration and communication across settings. Moving forward, it will be helpful to the PAI partners to have regular discussions about the integration process so that challenges can be addressed quickly and effectively.

Next steps

An evaluation of the post-training period will be conducted throughout the remainder of the PAI's second and final program year. Drawing on similar qualitative methods used for this report, the Phase II study will take a closer look at how the model is being implemented inside the participating foster care agencies. The goal of the study is to establish the parameters of the PAs' role: what occurs in interactions with families, how their role differs from that of other staff at the agency, and how, if at all, does agency context impact the ways the PAs do their work. Our aim is to understand in precise terms how the PAI model is practiced in order to lay the groundwork for future outcomes-based research.

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