

High Quality Parent Advocacy as an Intervention that Addresses Disproportionality

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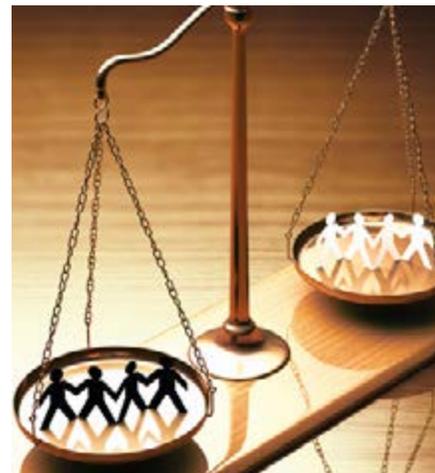
Data consistently confirms that in most states, families of color are disproportionately involved in the child welfare system. They are more likely to be reported for child abuse and neglect and once enmeshed in the system they are less likely to be offered family preservation services to ensure that children can safely stay at home. Families of color are more likely to have a child placed in non-relative foster care, and are more likely to experience longer-term foster care stays. High-quality parent representation, although not specifically a race-based intervention, cuts at the core of each of these systemic problems in the child welfare system.

Over the past decade, high-quality parent advocacy has been increasingly recognized as a strategy that results in better outcomes for children and families. In 2007, parent attorneys from across the country collaborated with the American Bar Association (ABA) to found the National Project to Improve Representation for Parents Involved in the Child Welfare System at the ABA's Center for Children and the Law. As Project Director Mimi Laver explains, "research shows that excellent parent

experienced the child welfare system firsthand and can empathize with the struggles that vulnerable families face.

CFR is assigned to represent parents when a petition is filed in court by the local child welfare agency. Their team quickly assesses the parent's situation and need for supports, often obviating the need for a foster care placement. If a child is placed in foster care, CFR provides comprehensive advocacy and assistance to parents to give them the best possible opportunity to reunite their family. CFR's Executive Director Michele Cortese says she sees "the impact that CFR's Cornerstone Advocacy Training has on jurisdictions around the country eager for help in changing the way parents are represented." All of CFR's clients live in poverty, and 82% are people of color.

The overrepresentation of families of color involved in the child welfare system is attributed to the overlay between race and class in the United States, assuming that lower income families are more likely to rely on public systems for services, education, and assistance, and that staff in these public systems are more likely to report families



efficacy. CFR staff can also work directly with the family to solve their real problems." As a result, more than 50% of CFR's clients are able to avoid foster care. Since 2007, when CFR began a high-volume practice, CFR's median length of stay for a child in foster care has been 5 months, compared to 11.5 months for all children citywide before CFR began. They re-enter care half as often.

What does all of this have to do with reducing disproportionality? Reducing and shortening foster care stays means that fewer children of color are entering and staying in foster care as a result of CFR's advocacy. Jacobs credits CFR's multidisciplinary model, and in particular the use of parent advocates. According to one of CFR's parent advocates, Monique Stanley, parent advocates are effective because of the trust they build as someone who has been in the client's shoes. "I've been there, as a parent in court when all you hear is your kids are not coming home today, tomorrow or anytime soon. But I tell them, 'I was a mess and I went into treatment, got clean and you can too.' And the parent advocate will go with the client to the treatment center and wait through the intake process with them. I tell clients you can call me anytime because you never know when they will be in need, and when I tell them that, I know it means a lot."

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Research shows that excellent parent advocacy improves outcomes for children by reuniting them with their parents more quickly and safely, reaching other permanency options sooner, and increasing use of kin for placement and support for families.

advocacy improves outcomes for children by reuniting them with their parents more quickly and safely, reaching other permanency options sooner, and increasing use of kin for placement and support for families." As the ABA and Administration on Children, Youth and Families have acknowledged, some of the hallmarks of high quality representation include: (1) reasonable sized caseloads; (2) access to multidisciplinary staff; (3) representation out of court; and (4) decreased time in obtaining safe permanency.

The Center for Family Representation (CFR) in New York City is an excellent example of high-quality parent representation in action. CFR is a nonprofit agency whose mission is to provide free legal assistance and social work services to enable children to stay with their parents safely. CFR uses a multidisciplinary team model of representation, assigning an attorney and social worker on each case, and often a parent advocate – a professional who has

to the child welfare system. As Sue Jacobs, the founding director and current Special Counsel at CFR explains, such high-quality representation serves as a check against the increased influx of families of color into the child welfare system because CFR staff can push back critically at assumptions that have been made about a family, helping child welfare staff better understand the family's situation and directing the family to supportive services if needed.

Once a child is placed in foster care, CFR staff works tirelessly to help the parent resolve the problems that resulted in the foster care placement. "The biggest issue," Jacobs explains, "is the match between what may have been alleged in court and what is actually going on. CFR staff can cut through and get to the heart of the issue; for instance, correcting the child welfare agency's impression that a parent was non-cooperative with a child's medication when in fact the parent wanted a second opinion about its