

HOW PARENTS AND THEIR ALLIES ARE CHANGING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

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May 30, 2024

CONDITIONS IN NEW YORK CITY BEFORE PARENTS HAD A VOICE (Pre-1990)

- 20 class action law suits against the city and foster care agencies
- Children were removed because of poverty confused with neglect.
Almost 50,000 children in foster care in one city
- Children were in care an average of 4 years; 7 years to be adopted
- 40% of indicated cases of abuse/neglect got no help

PARENTS ORGANIZE HELPED BY THE CHILD WELFARE FUND

- A major new force were child welfare parents who organized for the first time
- Parents worked with allies
- Child Welfare Fund provided small grants totaling \$1 million/year
- We believe people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives

WHAT PARENTS DID TO CHANGE THE SYSTEM

Part I

I. Parents trained to be Parent Advocates; hired in child welfare agencies

A Parent Advocate in child welfare is:

- A mother— and some fathers--Investigated or had a child placed into foster care
- Trained to be an advocate for herself and others
 - Training in 3 parts: class room, experiential, support groups

Commissioner Mattingly said: “Everywhere you look in this city, where we are doing our best work, where the best is happening, you find parent advocates around.”

Resistance from Social Workers

Social workers feared parents would:

- Tell them what to do
 - Second guess their decisions
 - Violate clients' confidentiality
 - Reexperience their own trauma
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- Concerns are real but parents worked collaboratively
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- Research showed parents, parent advocates and social workers feel better about the experience:
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- Marina Lalayants. "Building evidence about parent advocacy initiative in initial child safety conferences, Executive summary." Administration for Children's Services, New York, NY. 2019.

WHAT PARENTS DID TO CHANGE THE SYSTEM

Part II

II. Changed the social work community's perception of parents

- Rise Magazine by parents (www.Risemagazine.org)
- Represent by foster youth (www.representmag.org)
- Child Welfare Watch

Created 3 cash awards:

- For parents
- For youth in care
- For social workers

Social workers had contact with parents not as clients but as articulate and passionate spokespersons.

Contact Reduces Prejudice. That is what happened in child welfare.

WHAT PARENTS DID TO CHANGE THE SYSTEM

Part III

III. Community organizing by parents with children in foster care

- A countervailing force is needed to make real change.
- Organizations led by people who have been harmed are needed to make change
- This activity by parents and allies created a countervailing force that changed New York City's child welfare system



CHANGES PARENTS HELPED BRING ABOUT UNTIL 2018

- Almost 50,000 children in care in 1992; fewer than 9,000 in 2018
- Previously parents had terrible legal representation; pilot project of specially trained interdisciplinary legal teams of: A lawyer, a social worker, a parent advocate
- More support services are available to families: still shortages
- Parent advocates have a significant voice in the system:
 - Attend some Initial child safety conferences
 - Advisory panels
 - Speak in social work and law schools
 - Write for Rise Magazine
- **From Pariahs to Partners** presents the story



CHANGES IN NEW YORK CITY SINCE 2018

- Children in foster care continues to drop: from 9,000 in 2018 to fewer than 7,000 today
- Four children died in Aug-Sept 2021. Caused **brief** foster care panic
- Interdisciplinary Legal Representation is City Wide
 - **Evaluated:** Lucas Garber, et al., Effects of an interdisciplinary approach to legal representation in Child Welfare, Children and Youth Services Review, April 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2019.04.022>
- Parent advocates attend 10,000 initial child safety conferences.
- Parent advocates now work in all foster care agencies
- Parent advocacy and activism has grown in NYC and across the country. Parents lead legislative campaigns:
 - Passed legislation to make it harder to remove a child for poverty, raising standard of proof from “some credible evidence” to a “preponderance of evidence.”
 - Lost a legislative battle to tell parents their rights when being investigated
 - Similar legislation passed in Texas with a coalition of conservatives and liberals
- **International Review of Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare (2020)** documents the impact of parent advocacy at the case level

What hasn't changed in NYC?

The child welfare system is still:

- Punitive
- Residual
- Underfunded
- Too little assistance that families really need
- A system of social control
 - 53% of Black families investigated by time child 18
- Increased court mandated home supervision

PARENT ADVOCACY IN CHILD WELFARE HAS SPREAD TO OTHER HIGH INCOME COUNTRIES

- Parent and community participation in child welfare began among the Maori in new Zealand
- Today are at least 100 peer to peer support programs in at least 9 countries:
 - Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Norway, Scotland, Wales, and the United States. New programs starting in Northern Ireland.
- Examples
 - **Australia** (Queensland): Ministry Advisory Council wrote Parents Bill of Rights
 - **England**: Local Authorities (e.g. Camden, Southwark) hired parents for peer-to-peer support & advisory councils.
 - PFAN (www.PFAN.org)
 - **Canada** (Manitoba): Fearless R2W: First Nation; represent families; gets housing and other services
 - Finland



Parent Advocacy in Child Protection in Finland

- 2010: Voikkukia project at Kasper pioneers involving parents experts by experience to help parents in child protection
- 2019: Seppo Sauro visits New York City to see Parent Advocacy in action
- 2020: STEA Funding Center for Social Welfare & Health Organizations funded a pilot project Lauste in Turku: **Client to Companion**
 - Parents—experts by experience—provide emotional support to families

WHY DID NYC'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM CHANGE AS MUCH AS IT DID?

- Other reform efforts didn't have the same impact
- Organized parents were the one element not present before
- Parents and their allies created a countervailing force to push the system to change

Commissioner William Bell said

“The New York City child welfare system has fundamentally changed over the last several years . . . because you, parents, have forced us to change, because you have said openly and loudly: ‘Things cannot continue to go the way that they are going.’ And we’ve listened to that.”

WHAT IS NEEDED NOW?

- High income countries use peer-to-peer support. Necessary but not sufficient
- Need parents and allies to work for policy change
- Parents can be trained and hired as peer to peer advocates & community activists.
- Are resources available
 - Rise can help <https://www.risemagazine.org>
 - PFAN can help <https://www.pfan.uk>
 - IPAN has TOOLKIT FOR TRANSFORMATION: <https://toolkit.parentadvocacy.net>
- Need to evaluate parent advocacy programs