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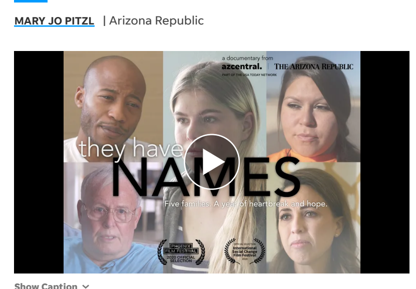
'Like having a really good friend': Program aims to reunify families in DCS cases

MARY JO PITZL | Arizona Republic



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For the last two years, an unlikely alliance of attorneys, social workers and parents has been quietly navigating the bewildering labyrinth of the child-welfare system, working to speed up cases and, hopefully, pull families back together.

This triad, formally called team-based representation, has been slowly expanding in Maricopa County since late 2019. It's similar to programs in other states with longer track records – records which show the programs are a boon for families.

The idea is simple, if not obvious.

When the state takes a child into its custody due to allegations of neglect or abuse, the parents are entitled to an attorney. There are numerous steps the parents must take to get their kids back: regular supervised visits, meetings with the Department of Child Safety, court dates, completing an array of services, many of which the parents are expected to sign up for themselves.

Many of these steps are not in the typical skill set of an attorney. But they're a perfect fit for social workers, who are familiar with the meetings and counseling needed to comply with court requirements, as well as where to find those mandatory services.

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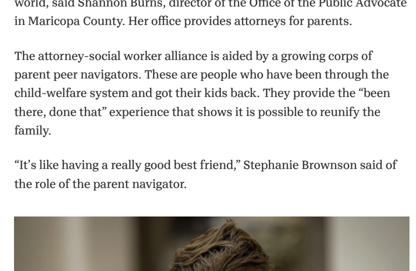
Social workers are ideal "language translators" for the child-welfare world, said Shannon Burns, director of the Office of the Public Advocate in Maricopa County. Her office provides attorneys for parents.

The attorney-social worker alliance is aided by a growing corps of parent peer navigators. These are people who have been through the child-welfare system and got their kids back. They provide the "been there, done that" experience that shows it is possible to reunify the family.

"It's like having a really good best friend," Stephanie Brownson said of the role of the parent navigator.



Brownson had a navigator when she was working through the process to get her kids back, and says it made all the difference.

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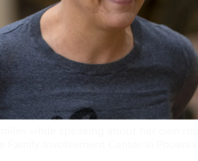

"I immediately trusted Lindsey because she went through it," Brownson said of Lindsey Shine, one of the early parent support staffers.

The system took their kids away. [Now they're helping other parents get theirs back]

Now, Brownson herself has joined the ranks of parent peer supports, having recently finished a one-year program under the direction of the Family Involvement Center, a nonprofit that has been working to improve support for families in the child-welfare system, as well as working to strengthen families through counseling and other programs so they don't enter the system.

The Center for Child Well Being at Arizona State University is studying the program, focusing on what peer parent navigators bring to team-based representation, how parents in a DCS case view them and tracking outcomes for those parents. A final report is due later this month.

Experience in other states has shown that by increasing support for parents in child-welfare cases, the likelihood of reuniting the family increases, and cases resolve more quickly than if a parent is represented only by an attorney.

Karin Kline, who pioneered the parent peer navigator program through the Family Involvement Center, said she's hopeful the report will show similar results in Arizona.

Programs that help parents in the high-stress and emotionally charged atmosphere of child welfare are needed now more than ever, Kline said. She pointed to a study released last summer that found [Maricopa County has the highest rate of severing parental rights among the nation's 20 largest counties].

"In terms of that number of parental rights that are terminated, we need more programs like this to help their chances just a little," Kline said of parents.

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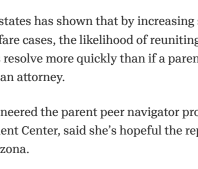

The program has impressed the presiding judge of the Maricopa County Juvenile Court, where DCS cases are heard.

"It's a really great development and it's increased the ability of parents to navigate the system," Judge Joseph Kreamer said.

Federal dollars make teams possible

The emergence of team-based representation in Arizona's largest county has been fueled by a change in federal rules, as well as a federal grant.

Officials at the Children's Bureau, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in late 2018 allowed money it sends to the states for support of foster care and adoptions to also be used to cover administrative costs for parent representation. Maricopa County has been using those dollars to expand its attorney services to employ contract social workers. Currently, 26 social workers are on contract; 11 are regularly used by attorneys.

Meanwhile, at the Family Involvement Center, Kline secured federal behavioral-health funding in a four-year grant to launch a formal peer navigator program. Participants must complete 24 credit hours in a social work program at Mesa Community College and serve an apprenticeship before being deployed to help parents.

The initial program drew nearly 100 applicants; 15 were accepted into the program and 10 graduated in October. Another class started in August, and applications for the August 2022 class will open next month.

Tapping hard-to-find resources

Teaming up attorneys with social workers and parent navigators is not a natural alliance. But it's also not a new idea, said Burns of the public advocate office. Programs in New York City, Philadelphia and Washington state have long used a team approach, and the results have shown better outcomes for parents compared to those who don't get the benefit of a multi-disciplinary team, she said.

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Attorneys were initially skeptical, but many have warmed to the program, Burns said. There is no requirement to work with a social worker; it's at the attorney's discretion, Burns said. Currently, up to 15 social workers are involved in cases with various attorneys.

Seth Draper said he didn't expect social workers would make much of a difference. After working with them on several cases, he's sold on the value of team representation.

The social workers, he said, provide another set of eyes and can vouch for the parent. Attorneys are required to stand up for their client, but social workers are under no obligation to do so, he said.

"I think the judges feel more comfortable having someone there who is a little more independent," he said.

Most of the social workers who independently contract with Burns' office are former DCS case managers. That's a benefit, said attorney Nidhi Naik, because they're familiar with the array of services DCS offers and that parents must complete as part of their case.

"There are hundreds of obscure services DCS has that may not get used a lot," Naik said. The social workers know how to find these programs and how to get a parent enrolled, she said. That speeds up a case, because in other circumstances, parents are often on their own to find such help.

Naik estimates she's handled a dozen or so cases using team-based representation. Only one did not result in reunification.

Attorney William Cawthorn said that in addition to the expertise he's seen social workers bring to a case, parent peer navigators can help keep a distraught parent on track.

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"It's a lot being thrown at these parents, very, very quickly," he said. "To be paired up with someone who has fought and made it through is very encouraging."

Cutting through red tape

Danielle Delgado and Jennifer Patterson are two of the pioneering social workers in the Maricopa County program. Both are former DCS case managers, and both say that experience is paying off in their new roles.

They have stories of cases that were on a track to sever the parents' rights and adopt out the children, only to be turned around once the parents got the benefit of a team.

Patterson was assigned to a case days before a trial to consider guardianship for the children was set to begin. It could have removed the children from their parents' care. But in less than six months, the case was dismissed; the judge ruled the children were to remain with their parents.

"We were able to help with housing, with food-box resources," Patterson said.

Those are the kinds of services DCS case managers are expected to offer to families, but due to busy caseloads that often doesn't happen or there is no follow through, Patterson and Delgado said.

Delgado said social workers can help cut through the red tape involved with many court-ordered services because they have an understanding of the system, something a stressed-out parent lacks. She urges her clients to take the initiative and sign up for services, such as counseling, parenting classes and regular drug testing.

"I tell them, 'You want to do anything and everything you can do to show the judge you're serious,' " she said.

The two often attend the meetings DCS convenes to check on the progress of a case. At first, they said, DCS staffers were wary, but as the team-based approach has grown, barriers are falling.

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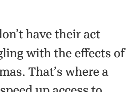

Reducing time in foster care

Burns said the public advocate's office has had 180 cases using the team-based approach since early 2020. Of those, 59 cases have closed (cases typically can last 18-24 months) and 64% ended with the family reunified. Another 24% resulted in the parents' rights being terminated, and the remainder were a mix of legal guardianships for the children or placements that allowed the parents access to their children.

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"The majority of these parents are parents who don't have their act together," Burns said, explaining many are struggling with the effects of domestic abuse, substance abuse and other traumas. That's where a team can help: The social workers know ways to speed up access to services that can help with those issues and can advocate for the parent; the navigators provide emotional and moral support.

"We don't need so many kids removed, we don't need so many kids in foster care," Burns said.

Kristy Dupree was one of those parents whose children were in foster care. All four kids are home now, after 14 months away from her. Dupree, one of the new parent peer navigators, said she could have used a navigator of her own while working through her issues.

"They could have at least kept me more calm," she said. "I was kind of running though it with my eyes closed at 100 mph. It definitely would have helped."

Dupree said she hopes to share the importance of determination for parents working to regain custody of their children.

"I knew this wasn't what I was going to settle for. I knew my kids were worth more than my drug addiction," she said.

"I knew whatever I was going through, I had to change my life. I didn't want to feel like that anymore —desperate, in the dark."

Carrie Bonifacio knows those feelings of desperation from her own experience of losing her kids.

"This sucked," she said. "It was hard."

Now, like Dupree, she is leaning on her experience to help others as a parent peer navigator.

"How fulfilling is that for a career?" she asked. "I'm going to bloom flowers out of this manure and help other people."

Reach the reporter at [maryjo.pitzl@arizonarepublic.com] and follow her on Twitter [@maryjpitzl].

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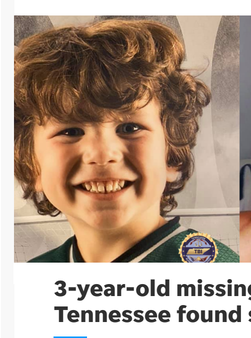
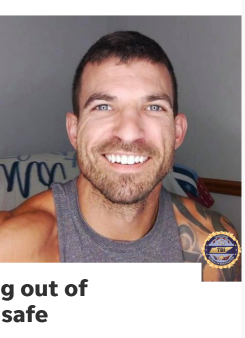

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