

## **Visioning for Prevention: Transforming Partnerships to Achieve Change Advice Reel Podcast**

Script Words: 1,364

Run Time: 9 minutes, 20 seconds

**NARRATOR:** In the state of Washington and elsewhere across the U.S., the Children's Home Society employs parent allies to meet parents at their court hearings, invite them to a Dependency 101 class, and offer them ongoing support throughout their case. They work in partnership with host organizations, child welfare agencies, and the judicial system to improve outcomes for families and children. Listen to a parent ally and an attorney discuss how the program can support prevention efforts.

**HEATHER CANTAMESSA:** Hi, my name's Heather Cantamessa and I am the National Family Impact Program Manager at Children's Home Society of Washington. And I'm a Parent Ally.

At the Parents for Parents program, we refer to parents with lived experience as Parent Allies.

I really believe that one of the most important pieces that we're missing is listening to parents that are impacted by the systems and services currently in place, especially the parents that have inspired you with their resilience and have successful outcomes and equally listen to those who didn't fare well.

We have insight into our own experiences and to our needs for our family. And we were able to navigate a system being ill-equipped, untrained, and under-resourced in a really high-stakes, intensely traumatic situation. And if you can see our resilience and our strengths and our skills, then why wouldn't you want us at the table to help guide you in your work and engaging families? We are family engagement experts.

**ROB WYMAN:** I'm Rob Wyman. I am an attorney working in the Judicial and National Engagement Team at Casey Family Programs.

We value families staying together. We value parent child relationships in Washington. Our statute starts with, "the family is the building block of our society".

There are definitely a lot of circumstances where cases travel deeper into the system due to lack of engagement. And so as, as a general matter, Parent Allies being able to bridge that engagement piece is super helpful.

They can talk to the social worker and their supervisor holding a TDM and say, "I've worked with the parent and they're here to engage. And I

hope your meeting is in good faith to really engage and have this conversation.”

Parents Allies have been incredibly helpful in my practice. My orientation is one to keep reminding us how little families absorb, especially in court-based engagements. Right?

You can imagine the difficulty of walking into a courthouse for the first time to face a judge about the fact that your children were just removed and why and then you walk in and it's just madness.

The attorneys who are there in the morning have too many cases. The judge has too long a calendar there's too few court staff. There's not enough people there to just meet people in a trauma-informed compassionate way. And Parent for Parents, they're there to meet families at the front door of the courthouse and say, “I've been where you are. I made it through the system. You can too. Here's where you go to find your attorney. Here's where you go to check into court to make sure they know where you are. Here's kind of how this morning's going to go.”

**HEATHER CANTAMESSA:**

We know that they're going to get through this and with our support, they're going to come out stronger, not broken. And then they're going to be able to reflect on their experience and use it to impact the system and parents in the system.

Everyone else is trained about the system and how to do their job in the system from attorneys to the social workers, case managers, I mean, even volunteer children's court reps and foster parents receive training.

So we train them about the dependency process and we translate complex system structures into, easy action steps, right.

We help them understand the roles of the stakeholders by having the stakeholders present to them and tell them what they expect from them, what their role is and what they should be successful families doing. And then we provide ongoing support.

We're not good at distilling things down being quiet and calm and compassionate, and being clear with listening and clear with our speaking

**ROB WYMAN:**

And Parent Allies can be very helpful in just like, say, “Hey, I need you to boil that down. I need you to come back. And that mother is not hearing you, they're not understanding what's going on and such”, and really bringing things down to a calm place where people can listen and participate.

**HEATHER CANTAMESSA:**

Once they successfully navigate and their case is closed, we bring them on board.

We have a clinical supervisor to help navigate some of the emotional health considerations that you could think about when you think about reentering the system that was so traumatic for you.

We really work on building their strengths and developing their workforce skills because Parents for Parents is often a stepping-stone to further your career, to taking everything you've ever did wrong and using it, not only to heal yourself and your family, but to help other families and this often leads to a bridge out of poverty.

I know that agencies are being pressed to do a better job at engaging parents and families, and they feel like they have to choose. And I just want them to know that when they're thinking about making a choice of which Parent Partner program to incorporate, I urge them to find a way to support the implementation of all of them. They all complement one another and promote more positive outcomes than our system currently offers.

We need to create positions within every program associated with child welfare to employ Parent Allies.

**ROB WYMAN:**

You reach out to your, your legal community and find out who's willing, able, and maybe already working in the prevention space.

In that building of the service array, think about supporting Parent for Parent Programs that can be in that space.

We want to help here not later on down the road when we're going to be further into it.

We're talking about small episode helps that prevent large episode engagements in the foster care system.

What we hope is ubiquitous throughout the country to where, when you hear, oh, this court or this community has a Parent for Parent Program to help with engaging families and to support families that are in, or are at risk of being in the child protection system, our answer would be, "Yeah, of course they do. Everybody does."

And you get a lot of return on investment with parents who are parents and peer programs in general. They're your missing ingredient and they're your secret sauce.

**HEATHER CANTAMESSA:**

What we need to design is a system that parents, when they're struggling, but they don't have the answer, they seek that system out because they know that they're going to come out stronger than when

they were first encountered. And when we have a system like that, we know we've figured this out.

**NARRATOR:**

You've heard how agencies get a lot of return on investment by engaging parent allies and peer programs in general. Where can you find a place for parent allies in your prevention work? How does your organization listen to parents impacted by your system and services? Take Heather's advice to listen to parents that have inspired you with their resilience and also to listen to those who were less successful and Rob's advice, too, to reach out to find partners in your legal community. This advice can help you build a collective vision for prevention. To hear more about how the Children's Home Society of Washington's Parents for Parents program aligns with Family First Prevention Plan goals, watch the recorded webinar, Visioning for Prevention: Transforming Partnerships to Achieve Change available on our website at [capacity.childwelfare.gov/states](http://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states)

This podcast was created by the Capacity Building Center for States under Contract No. HHSP233201500071I, funded by the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The opinions expressed by individuals quoted do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Children's Bureau.