

Parenting Awareness Month

Read Spotlight on ‘Parents as Partners’

The Issue: A strong case can be made that Michigan must support all parents as their children’s first and best teachers. For parents facing the most significant challenges in caring for their children, more investments are necessary to boost programs that help reunify and strengthen families while ensuring children have safe, stable and nurturing homes. Rates of substantiated child maltreatment have been steadily rising in Michigan since 2005, and our state continues to operate under court monitoring due to poor outcomes for children and families in our foster care system. Each year, 13,000 Michigan children reside in out-of-home care; 23 percent or 2,400 of them live in Wayne County. A model program aimed at improving a parent’s parenting skills, ability to reclaim their children from foster care, and reduce the potential for maltreatment is making a difference in the lives of children and their birth parents in Wayne County.

[Parents as Partners](#) is a reunification program serving families who have lost their children to foster care due to allegations of abuse or neglect. The key program element is peer relationships, utilizing parents that once lost their children to foster care but were reunited now serving as mentors to parents who are working to get their children back. The program relies solely on federal funding, and is part of the [Michigan Family Preservation Program](#) within the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) and is only offered in Wayne County through Judson Center and Spectrum Human Services. Other states – Kentucky, Iowa, California and Washington – have similar programs that have been studied and expanded. Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder’s proposed 2017 budget plans calls for adding over \$2 million toward the Parent as Partners program over the next three years to expand it into Genesee and Macomb Counties. Current funding provides for two teams of five parents as partners and a supervisor at the Judson Center and Spectrum Human Services at a cost of \$350,000 a year per team. The teams are assigned to work with 100 families each over a six-month period with the opportunity for a six-month renewal.

The Wayne County experience has shown that children’s time in foster care has shortened by four to six months when parents have worked with the Parents as Partners program, said Guy Thompson, the manager of the MDHHS Family Preservation Program Office. Ninety-seven percent of parents surveyed said that they did increase their parenting knowledge because of the required community meetings, workshops, training and mentoring. Last year, 87 percent of children of enrolled families had not experienced maltreatment a year after their parents completed the program and they were returned home.

A Story of Two Mothers: Patrice, a 40-year-old mother from Melvindale, said her family “was going through a lot of things” when the state placed her younger children, a son, now 13, and a



Linda Passmore and son Jovon at 11 months (left) while he was in foster care and with Jovon at age 21 (right).

daughter, now 16, in foster care four years ago. Her husband had died and she was struggling to deal with the mental health challenges of her children; her son was living with undiagnosed autism and her daughter had an emotional impairment.

Patrice was referred to the Parents as Partner program through a Department of Health and Human Services review and mentor Linda Passmore from the Judson Center was assigned to help her.

Passmore had traveled the same road as Patrice but decades earlier when her own son was placed in foster care at age 8 months. Passmore was 19 years old at the time and the victim of domestic violence. Her son remained in foster care for 18 months before she was able to reclaim him after being cleared of abuse charges and following court hearings surrounding the domestic abuse and subsequent divorce. In the early 2000s, Passmore was enrolled in social work courses at Baker College when a social worker at a Family Team Meeting she was attending suggested she apply for a position with the then new Parents as Partners program in Wayne County.

“Back then I had to find my own parenting classes, my own therapists,” Passmore said. “I knew I wanted to advocate for people, especially after my situation.”

Patrice said Passmore’s support went beyond the assistance of a social worker or attorney. She helped her navigate court hearings and ask pertinent questions, drove her to visits with her children, and helped her line up food for the children when they visited her. Passmore’s support was invaluable in helping Patrice find appropriate responses to her son’s challenging behaviors, too. With Passmore’s help and encouragement, Patrice started researching her son’s developmental disorder online and in books.

“I developed a great relationship with Linda. She was there when I was stressed and she helped with resources to find a resolution to a problem,” Patrice said

One of the most important benefits clients receive from their parent partners is emotional support necessary to shore up their self-esteem which often hits rock bottom when children are removed from the home. Because of their own success, parent partners are able to instill

hope. They also offer tough love. “Sometimes I’m able to tell them flat out, in layman’s terms they understand, ‘You’ve got to get your act together,’” Passmore said. Program administrators said helping parents deal with life’s difficulties, most commonly housing, employment and transportation needs, are also typical of a parent partner’s work day.

“She was a parent who had gone through a similar situation and was very understanding and not judgmental. It made me comfortable with the whole process,” Patrice said.

Usually parent partners spend six to eight hours a week with a parent, and the services are based on the specific needs of the family in order to better position them to reunify with their children. Parent partners may accompany parents to family team meetings and court appointments, where they often help translate court documents when the parent’s literacy is poor. They may discuss the parent’s educational goals, offering resources, help find housing assistance, write a resume, and connect parents to local resources. Another important skill they impart: Building up a parent’s confidence and showing them how to speak up for themselves in professional settings. Parent partners don’t need to be social workers or have a college degree to serve in their job, but they must be empathetic and willing to learn, said Brandy Porterfield, Judson’s Building Community Partnerships supervisor.

The parent partners meet regularly with a supervisor for case reviews, and provide input at meetings with agency staff to problem-solve and make future plans. Workforce development staff will seek their insights into parents’ needs on questions of employability. Porterfield said she trains parent partners on making weekly case notes. But before hiring a parent partner, she examines whether they’ve learned from past errors and are emotionally stable.

Not surprisingly, demand for the program has carried beyond its Wayne County service area, administrators said. Judson, for example, routinely hears from parents in nearby Oakland, Macomb, Washtenaw and Genesee Counties seeking help, but they’re unable to accommodate them.

Life is different today for Patrice and her family. Her children returned home after 14 months in outside care. Today they are both attending school and Patrice is an active participant in her son’s IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meetings. She continues to research autism issues and when she needs additional support, she reaches out to advocacy groups for help.

“My whole life has changed,” Patrice said. “I’m more understanding and just take one day at a time. I have a better relationship with my kids and have more faith in my life. When I learned how to do that, things started to work out more smoothly for me.”

Passmore, one of the original parent partners in the Wayne County program, has been working with families for seven years and estimates she’s assisted 250 of them.

“Being able to work to work with parents, educate parents, empower the parent, that’s where I can make a difference so that they’re able to stand on their own, able to do what they need to do to take care of themselves and their family when I’m gone,” Passmore said.

Thompson said he’s been pleased with the results from the program. “It has been quite successful. The birth families truly embraced it as helpful. The judges have embraced it as helpful. And the referring foster care workers have also reported it to be quite helpful,” he said.

Patrice said the program’s success is built around one common denominator. “The best assistance is from someone who has had the same experiences as you.” she said. “There are people out there who are struggling, with no one to turn to, no one to talk to, and just feel lost. It’s good to know there is someone out there who can help.”

[Read more: The Governor’s Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Recommendations: Investments in Young Children and Families](#)