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**“At the Frontlines:” Parent Advocacy Initiative to Address Family Needs and Prevent Child Maltreatment**

**Purpose & Description**

Social service providers have long agreed that client empowerment and inclusion in the service planning and delivery will result in improved outcomes. Although it is especially difficult to engage parents who are being investigated for neglect/abuse, meaningful parent engagement could give voice to and make parents as key stakeholders visible and ultimately lead to better safety and permanency outcomes for families (Anthony, Berrick, Cohen, & Wilder, 2009; Cohen & Canan, 2006). Such an understanding informed the mission of New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services’ (ACS) multi-year-long Citywide Parent Advocacy Initiative, which provided specially trained parent advocates (PAs) in ACS field offices across New York City (USA) to offer individualized supports to parents undergoing child maltreatment investigations.

This presentation reports on the qualitative evaluation study of the PA Initiative. The presentation will depict the experiences of multiple stakeholders (parents, PAs, and ACS staff) within the PA initiative and the impact of the PA initiative on family outcomes. Namely, this presentation will elaborate on the nature of the cultivated relationships between parents and advocates that resulted in positively altering a family’s experience within the child welfare system and the lived experiences of peers working alongside advocates. Furthermore, the presentation will report on the types of supports that the PAs provided and their helpfulness.

In addressing the needs of families, parent advocates demonstrated both an understanding and an insight into the diverse causes that disproportionately affected serviced populations. A sensitivity towards the challenges faced by parents struggling with issues related to health and mental health, substance use, housing insecurity, domestic violence, and ensuring adequate and appropriate access to social services informed the array of interventions offered by parent advocates in their attempts to bolster family functioning. Advocates embodied the “person-in-environment” approach towards service provision by actively soliciting parent feedback with great emphasis placed on familial and agency collaboration, cultural competence, and empowerment. Such an approach relied heavily upon the continued active engagement and feedback of involved families to inform best practices.

Implications

The findings presented would offer a fresh insight into innovative approaches that child welfare programs could undertake to better engage and support child welfare-involved families by partnering with satellite parent advocacy organizations. Given the onerous burdens that child welfare caseworkers already shoulder and the reluctance some families may express in engaging with such workers, innovative ideas must be explored to best address the twin goals of ensuring a child’s safety and well-being and maintaining family preservation when feasible.

Keywords**:** parent advocacy, family-centered decision-making, family support, engagement

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