

PARTNERING



WITH PARENTS

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

A Newsletter for Birth Parents by Birth Parents

June 2013 • Volume 6

From the new chair



Greetings! My name is Jacqueline LeNoir and I am the newly-elected chairperson of the Birth Parent Council. I would like to take this moment to introduce myself to parents I have not yet had a chance to meet.

I have been a member of the council for five years. I am dedicated to helping other parents who need assistance navigating through the system as I did when I first became a member of the Birth Parent Council several years ago. I will continue to provide the support and guidance to parents that will help families to stay together.

I am a mother of six children, four boys and two girls. I'm also a grandmother of two granddaughters and six grandsons. I became involved with DCFS nearly six years ago. I'm a strong supporter of the importance of the social worker/parent relationship. My husband and I overcame many challenges and all of our children were returned home successfully.

If you are not a member of the council, I invite you to join, and if you are a member, I invite you to get involved and help us to reach out to other parents. Thank you. I look forward to working with you.

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Our History and Our Mission

The ultimate purpose of child welfare agencies is to help families in crisis become stable and unified. In child welfare, birth parents have been sorely overlooked, which hinders and many times defeats the purpose.

The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) introduced the Partnering With Parents Initiative to address the concerns and needs of birth parents as the agency recognized the need for change on behalf of parents receiving child welfare services.

Its main goal is to give families a voice regarding the policies, programs and services provided to them. To that end, the Birth Parent Councils of Cook County were created, which include a Core Council and councils in each region. The mission of all councils is to identify issues concerning birth parents and present these issues to the appropriate government officials to bring about durable policy changes that will aid all parents with DCFS involvement, now and in the future. All members of the councils are birth parents.

Birth Parent Council highlights

Birth parent presentations

Members of the birth parent council continue their mission of making a difference in the lives of parents involved with the child welfare system and educating professional staff and students.

- Four parents made two panel presentations to approximately 80 students at Loyola University School of Law and Social work.
- The Cook County birth parents held: nine monthly Council meetings; five Haymarket Center meetings; five monthly steering committee meetings and two focus group meetings.
- Two parents continue to mentor new parents at the Cook County Juvenile Court.

Foundation training

Training of DCFS staff continues to be an important part of becoming an effective caseworker and birth parents are an important part of that training. In 2012, parents presented to approximately 175 new casework and supervisory staff.

Meetings with DCFS executive staff

Ten core and regional parents met with the deputy director of Clinical Practice and Development and eight core parents met with the statewide training administrator.



Participants at the 2012 Birth Parent Institute

The ABC's of the birth parent mentoring program

Terry LeNoir Sr., Birth Parent Mentor, Cook County Birth Parent Council

As I continue my journey down the road of parent mentoring, I need to say thank you to all the parents that have participated in our program over the past 18 months and hope that it has helped you along the way to reunification with your child or children.

A few years ago the birth parent members of the Birth Parent Council were at a monthly meeting discussing how our journey might have been less stressful had we had a mentor to talk to that really understood what parents go through when their child/children are removed from their home.

The birth parent mentoring program was started on December 5, 2011 and we took up space in the DCFS Child Protection Division on January 17, 2012. I met with my first parent on the same day and mentoring program began.

I have personally mentored over 150 parents and many have had their child/children returned to their custody. My goal is to help parents understand the court process and give them the knowledge and skills they need to make the most of their journey through the child welfare system. I try to help parents gain a clear understanding of what their rights and responsibilities are as they journey through the

court process and understand how the child welfare system works through the court process.

There are four key areas that I work with parents in: communication skills; appearance and presentation; knowledge and decision making. When I meet a parent I tell them it does not matter why his or her case came in, but what does matter is what he or she does to get their child/children home – and if that means making some lifestyle changes or changing the way you think, then all the better.

I meet face to face with parents when they come to court and we exchange phone numbers so we can communicate between court dates. Parents also receive a Parent Toolkit that has a booklet called *Guide to Juvenile Court*, the list of Parents Rights and Responsibilities, and an assortment of resources and other items.

After the initial 90 days of working with a parent, we evaluate whether he or she is ready to continue the journey through the child welfare system with the different supports that should be in place or if that parent needs more time working with a mentor.

At the close of our mentoring time together, parents are en-



couraged to follow up with the Birth Parent Council, whose mission as a council is to identify issues concerning birth parents and present those issues to the appropriate government officials to bring about durable policy changes that will aid all parents with DCFS involvement, now and in the future. All members of the councils are birth parents.

Blaming everyone else instead of looking in the mirror can be hard. But when your child/children are no longer in your home, it's time to get real with yourself and face the fact that something was wrong or went wrong in your home that caused your child/children to be removed from your home. Parents that have made the voluntary choice to work with the birth parent mentoring program have made a good decision.

Tips for engaging families during home visits



My name is Judith Triplett-Flenorl and I am the newly-elected co-chairperson of the Cook County Birth Parent Council. Although most of you have never met me, I have been a member of the council for over three years. During that time, I have had the opportunity to tell my journey of involvement with DCFS several times as a presenter at foundations

training sessions for new DCFS child welfare staff. At the end of my presentation, I always offer “tips” that may help to more effectively engage parents during one of the most critical times: the home visits. This is where trust is earned or lost, respect is received and given, and true rapport can be established or destroyed. Most of these tips are self explanatory, others I will explain about in short detail.

1. Wear comfortable, appropriate clothing. Do not show up at a client’s home overdressed, or looking

like a slob. Too much bling or name brand clothes may make you seem snobbish, while being too casual may make you appear unconcerned and lazy.

2. Please sit down during home visits. Just think how you would feel if someone came to your house, wanted to get all in your business, and would not sit down, even after you invited him or her to do so. If you are not invited to sit,

Continued on the following page

Views of a new council parent



My name is Taniya Scott and my involvement with the Department of Children and Family Services started in 2007.

Over the last six years I have grown exponentially. I have always been a compliant parent and have taken advantage of all the services offered to me by the Department of Chil-

dren and Family Services. I first learned about the Birth Parent Council in August of 2012 and have been a member for almost a year.

The council has served me greatly. I now know all about the services that I wish I had known were available when my case first opened. I was also involved with the Birth Parent Mentoring Program located at the Cook County juvenile court building, and that program has been very helpful to me as well.

I became the co-secretary of the council in January of 2013. I take notes at our monthly meetings and helped organize this year’s institute day. As council members, we help other parents who are involved with DCFS navigate the system successfully by conducting in-service workshops that facilitate return home.

I love what I do and I appreciate the support of the Birth Parent Council.

Look for announcements and flyers announcing future Birth Parent Council events!

- please ask. Although families are being investigated, always be respectful.
3. Do not be offended by explicit music. Music with explicit lyrics is common in our society, and nasty lyrics do not mean a bad parent. If you become offended by music, it may impair your judgement. If this is a **repeat** issue, **then** address it. But not in the beginning, and not just because you don't like the music. Maintain as much objectivity as possible.
 4. Don't judge the condition of the house, especially not without asking questions that will give clues to it's current, as well as usual, state. Some people were not taught to clean properly, and everyone has a bad house day just like they may have a bad hair day.
 5. Don't judge family manners. Be open in order to understand the family dynamics.
 6. Acknowledge and respect cultural/class and personal preferences. Some cultures believe no one should sit in the living room, while some other cultures may believe the living room is for living.
 7. Never be afraid to ask a parent for assistance to understand their culture.
 8. Help parents to be comfortable by stepping outside your comfort zone and imagine how you would feel in their shoes.
 9. Help families locate resources by keeping **your own** database of community organizations that provide various types of assistance. This shows genuine care and concern.
 10. Beware of co-worker bias that can severely impair your objectivity to a family's situation. Just because a co-worker is nice to you, it doesn't mean they follow protocol with clients or act professionally when only clients are around. And just because the previous worker didn't like the parents, that doesn't mean you won't like them too. Form your own opinions and conclusions.
 11. Have empathy and compassion for your parents. What if you were in their shoes?
 12. Once again, BE OBJECTIVE!
 13. Again, I repeat, form your own opinions and draw your own conclusions!
 14. Plan enough time for visits so you don't have to rush through. Having a rushed visit makes you seem unorganized, unconcerned, and unprofessional.
 15. Use all learned tools for effective communication. If you aren't sure what to do, ask the parents how you can better communicate with them.
 16. Be real. Don't use technical language.
 17. Always advocate for the client when appropriate. You wouldn't want anyone to "leave you hanging" or "throw you under the bus."
 18. Be honest. Always.
 19. Be reliable. If you expect parents to do their part, always do yours.
 20. Listen, listen, and listen! It could save a child and/or parent's life from pain.
 21. Always be as supportive as possible.

A voice that matters

Donnella Bishop-Ward

Cook County Birth Parent Program Administrator

Members of the Cook County Birth Parent Council asked me to discuss why I invest so much time and energy working with the Cook County Council.

I have been a social worker for over 40 years in the public child welfare sector. My first question to my supervisor all those years ago was “where are these children’s extended family members and why are they placed with strangers?”

Birth parents should have a voice in the decisions that are made about their children. They should also be taught their rights when their children have to be removed, and children should be returned to their parents or other responsible family members as soon as possible.

As a young direct service worker many years ago, I was on a mission to locate parents whose written reports consistently labeled them as “unavailable,” or “whereabouts

unknown.” In many instances, a diligent search and information obtained from children revealed that the parents lived in the same community. Once we located them and invested time in building a non-judgmental, positive attitude that let them know that we were there to help, much of the initial anger, hostility and other trauma-generated behavior subsided and we were able to begin the serious work of identifying needs and resources that could keep children within their extended family unit.

In my current work with birth parents, I have the privilege of working with some of the most caring, intelligent, often misunderstood, people that I have known in my long career. Many of these parents came to the council because someone in authority mandated them to do so. They were quick to let me know that fact and were determined that they were not going to contribute.

Over time, many saw that the council is really there for them and that they could trust facilitators from DCFS.

Most of our current parent leaders have been allowed to find and use their skills to not only help themselves, but also other parents who need guidance, direction and support from



parents who have successfully overcome the obstacles and barriers that new parents are currently experiencing.

It has been extremely refreshing to know that so many other service staff, professionals and administrators from DCFS, juvenile court, Haymarket, Northwestern University, University of Illinois, Loyola University, Community Mental Health Council, The Board of Education and many others have dedicated their time, expertise and support to help birth parents understand their behavior, find their way and successfully navigate through the child welfare and juvenile court systems.

Thanks to all of you for assisting in empowering birth parents and giving them a voice that has given them the respect of high level professionals – a voice that is sure to facilitate a different service ending for themselves, their children and their families.

Have something to share?

If you have a personal story, helpful information, poem, or words of encouragement and would like to be considered for our next “Making Things Happen” issue, please contact Donnella Bishop-Ward at 773-371-6000.

Community resources for families

Family Advocacy Centers

DCFS-contracted caseworker makes the referral or parents can contact directly

Healthy Families Chicago

Diane Scruggs
2100 S. Marshall Blvd.
Chicago, IL 60623
773-257-0111

A Knock At Midnight

400 W. 76th St., Suite 206
Chicago, IL 60620
773-488-2960

Latino Family Advocacy Center

8956 S. Commercial Ave
Chicago, IL
773-356-5923

Bright Star Community Outreach

3473 S. Martin Luther King Dr.
Suite 334
Chicago, IL 60616
773-373-5220

Fellowship Connection

2435 W. Division St.
Chicago, IL 60622

Rebano Fellowship Church

773-772-1141

Social Services

Salvation Army Family Service Division

Counseling, emergency shelter and homemakers
4800 N. Marine
Chicago, IL 60640
773-275-6233

*Call the Salvation Army for coat vouchers, financial assistance and Zip code referral to local offices

Food Assistance

Greater Food Depository

773-247-3663
Zip code referral to pantries
www.chicagofoodbank.org

Recreation

Chicago Park District

312-742-5381
www.chicagoparkdistrict.com

YMCA

312-932-1200
www.ymcachgo.org

Paternity Testing

Rutha Johnson

773-928-4659

Housing Assistance

DCFS Advocacy Office

406 East Monroe Street
Springfield IL 62701
800-232-3798 or 217-524-2029
E-mail: AOCF@idcfs.state.il.us



The service appeal process

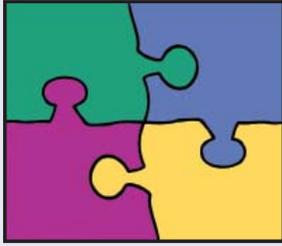
Successfully completing services is an important part of children being returned home and safely reuniting with their parents. It is important for parents to get involved in their services as soon as possible.

Sometimes one of the barriers to completing services is not receiving a service plan. In an effort to assist parents, a policy has been made that allows parents to petition for a service appeal if they do not receive their service plan within 45 days. A service appeal is a process that allows you to voice your concerns regarding differences of opinion about your service plan, including not receiving a plan from your caseworker. You should be involved in planning the services you feel you and your family need by talking about them with your caseworker.

If you are having issues with your service plan you may request a service appeal by writing to:

Administrative Hearings Unit
Department of Children and Family Services
406 E. Monroe Street
Station #15
Springfield, IL 62701

PARTNERING



WITH PARENTS

MEETING SCHEDULES

*There are regional DCFS offices in North, South, and Central Cook County. Contact your Regional DCFS office for information about BPC meetings in your area.

BIRTH PARENT COUNCIL CONTACT INFORMATION

Donella Bishop-Ward
Program Administrator
773-371-6107
PartneringwithParents@
illinois.gov

Visit Partnering with Parents on the web:

[http://www.state.il.us/
DCFS/library/com_
communications_PWP.
shtml](http://www.state.il.us/DCFS/library/com_communications_PWP.shtml)



Find DCFS on facebook
at [Facebook.com/
ProtectIllinoisKids](https://www.facebook.com/ProtectIllinoisKids)

Membership Information

The only requirement to become a member of the Birth Parent Council is to be a parent who is currently or was formerly involved with DCFS. We are looking for birth parents who are interested in attending a regional forum designed to provide support for parents who are going through the difficult process of regaining custody of their children. The meetings are held on the South side, West side, and North side of Chicago when parents register to attend meetings.

The core council meets once a month with DCFS personnel, and more often when needed, to discuss the concerns identified by birth parents and to plan activities that address these concerns based on the needs of birth parents.

It is our goal to create a strong membership of parents similar to the councils for foster parents and foster children that will have a positive impact on the way birth parents receive services. We respectfully ask that if you are a birth parent, to become a part of this growing group of people who have something to say about ourselves, our children and our families.

Advocacy

DCFS Advocacy Office for Children and Families

Parents can contact this office for assistance with matters that have not been resolved with your caseworker or caseworker's supervisor.

406 East Monroe Street
Springfield IL 62701
800-232-3798 or 217-524-2029
E-mail: AOCF@idcfs.state.il.us

Office of the Public Defender

For legal representation in juvenile court
2245 West Ogden Avenue, 7th Floor
Chicago, IL 60612
312-433-7047

Office of the Inspector General

2240 West Ogden Avenue
Chicago, IL 60612
312-433-3000