

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

A Newsletter for Birth Parents by Birth Parents

June 2012 – Volume V



Families

Staying Together

Staying Strong

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A WORD FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Reverend Terry LeNoir, Sr.



Our Mission **Our History**

Dreams Accomplished.....What is NEXT!

Greetings to all of our Birth Parents, it is my prayer that all of you are doing well, and continuing to overcome all obstacles to reunite with your children.

I find myself filled with a sense of accomplishment at what we as a group of dedicated parents have been able to accomplish during my tenure as Birth Parent Council Chair, as my season comes to an end I would like to take this time to say to all of the Birth Parents thank you very much for all you do and those you do it for. If you desire to be the Chair of the Council, please begin to prepare for our upcoming election in December.

Over the course of my tenure, there have been many memorable accomplishments, but most of all the, the best, and the most fulfilling has been the establishment of the BIRTH PARENT MENTORING PROGRAM, overseen by Healthy Families Chicago, where Diane Scruggs is our Executive Director. This is the first of its type in the state of Illinois funded through the Department of Children and Family Services. This is the result of a group of parents at one of the core council meetings, where we were discussing if we knew then what we know now our journey would have been less traumatic and our time away from our children would have been less. As mentors the focus at this time is to work with first time parents for the first 90 days to introduce them to the child custody system.

We mentor them in four key areas of development, communication (how you talk to people for the best effect), presentation (please do not come to court looking any old kind of way), knowledge (the who, what, where, when, and how of the child welfare system), and finally decision making (thinking things through); is the decision you

make going to be what's best for your children and you.

As we go and grow, it could not be more obvious that this type of program is so needed, as the average age of parents we work with is nineteen to twenty six. However, there is still a family member that is all too often left out or overlooked and that is the father. Research has shown that when a stable father is in the home the outcomes for the children are better. Fatherhood has to be at the forefront of family reunification, and the father needs services just as the mother does, with that said more needs to be done to reach out to fathers and once that's done find ways to keep them engaged to work through the child welfare system. Much research and many focus groups have been convened on behalf of fatherhood, however the results are somewhat disappointing, yet encouraging about how social service agencies view and treat fathers. Although much has been done to reunite families in crisis there is still much more to do. Until all children have a whole family and a safe stable, nurturing home to grow up in we cannot afford to take a break and sit on the sidelines and watch as our communities are torn apart. We all have a part in raising our children; please remember the old saying:

***“IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO
RAISE A CHILD
AND OUR CHILDREN”.***

Prayerfully and Humbly, Your Servant

Rev Terry LeNoir Sr., BPC Chair

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 includes 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.

Congratulations!

It has been said that the best person to help another person with a problem is someone who has overcome that same problem. A much needed, new, and exciting Parent Mentor program was started to give support to birth parents from the very beginning. Many meetings and talks were held to discuss the possibility of hiring birth parents to provide this support. Healthy Families Chicago hired two BPC Cook County Core Council members as parent mentors in the Cook County Juvenile Court System. Their job is to help new parents involved with the child welfare system better navigate. Congratulations to Ms. Theresa Leggins and Rev. Terry Lenoir for becoming pioneers in child welfare and making the journey to reunification a little smoother.

Working With New Parents - By Theresa Leggins



I felt real good when I was chosen to be a Birth Parent Mentor because I knew other parents were out there with DCFS cases that needed this kind of help. All parents should know the “do’s and don’ts” and how to be consistent in coming to court and completing services, especially new parents. This program teaches parents four goals; Communication, Presentation, Knowledge, and Decision Making. Part of my job is to introduce parents to these goals by sharing with them how to communicate effectively with the people on their team such as their caseworker and lawyer. I also talk with them about how to present themselves in court by dressing and behaving properly. My parents and I also discuss making sure they know everything about what is going on in court concerning their case and what it means to make good decisions for themselves and their family. Since I have been a Birth Parent Mentor, I have had the pleasure of helping approximately fifty parents. It can be challenging sometimes because not all of my parents want to do what they need to do and it is difficult to communicate with them, especially when I know they really need to take advantage of this program and put their best effort into making it work for them. Overall, I can say that I feel this job makes me a better person. I am out in the field and I am working and doing things that really matter...I am paying it forward!



Creating Good Memories For Our Children

by Terrilyn Alexander

I remember growing up playing in the sunshine and feeling absolutely free and safe. Sadly, those days seem to be long gone by today's standards. I have vivid and fond memories of very sunny days when I was a young girl, jumping rope, playing tag, 1, 2, 3, red light! Simon says, and other fun games with my siblings and our friends. My mother and stepfather did their best to create a happy up bringing for my siblings and me. They would take us to the beach at night and we would lie on our blankets and watch the stars. And on holidays, we would take fireworks to the beaches and light them causing sheer delight. We also went to the drive-in where we could watch movies from our car outside, on a bigger than life movie screen. They also had a concession stand where you could buy candy, popcorn, nachos and ice cream. We had a ball on these special nights, whenever we could afford it. There were twelve of us. My mom had eight children with my father and then remarried and adopted four of my stepfather's children. Other special places we would visit were amusement parks called Fun Town and Riverview. The fun we had at these two parks was absolutely incredible! Etched in my memory are the lights, the cotton candy, the merry-go-round and the people. These were some of the best times of my childhood. At Christmas time, my mother, who worked for Continental Bank, was allowed to choose two of her youngest children to take to the annual Christmas party each year. I attended two years in a row. My mother would put us on our prettiest dresses and patent leather shoes. We also wore our best coats, and she would style our hair to perfection with ribbons and bows. The bank's lobby was filled with a live band playing Christmas music and several very large trees decorated with beautiful lights and all kinds of Christmas ornaments. We would then go into the theater to see the play called the Nutcracker. After the play, we were given a huge Christmas stocking filled with candy and toys. And before we left to go home, we were each given a gift! This was an absolute fairyland dream come true, as well as the best memory of my childhood. In addition to creating fun memories for us, our mother and father would make sure we went to every church service there was. We went to Choir rehearsal, BTU (Baptist Training Union), Bible study and Sunday school, at least five days a week. My stepfather had formed a gospel group called "The Harmony Star" my brother Brian and younger stepbrother William played the guitar. My stepfather's group was very popular in the gospel circles. One time he even put together my sisters and I in our own group, we wore matching navy blue polka dot dresses, matching shoes and white ankle socks. I think we were called the Mt. Olive Specials. We didn't sing very long or very well, we quit after six months. However, we would travel with my mother and stepfather from church to church to listen to his group and many other talented singers. Although going to church was not as fun as going to Fun Town or Riverview, we learned some very valuable lesson about loving God, family, others and ourselves. Creating memories such as the ones I experienced might be a bit challenging in these times. However, all is not lost. I've created some memories for my own children that might help parents who would like to create memories for their children but don't know quite where to start. One of the first memories I created was to document the milestones of each of my children from infancy to their current age. I also documented their likes and dislikes, their favorite colors as well as their accomplishments each year. In addition to this, I keep every paper they bring home from school with a grade on it, as well as artwork and projects they've done in school. When the school year ends, I box the items up, mark each box with the year and grades they were in, and I store them in the garage. Other ways my husband and I create memories for our children is through music. We play all kinds of music, such as Jazz, Classical, Country, Pop, Gospel and R & B (rhythm and blues). We also, take our children to Lincoln Park Zoo and have picnics in the Garden not far from it. We also have special nights that we watch movies on Net Flix. But the best and most important way we create memories for our children is when we come together as a family each night for dinner and talk about our day. These are just some of the cost free ways we enjoy and create memories for our children and ourselves. Here are ten more suggestions that could be a great start to helping you create cost free memories for your children as well as yourselves. 1. Take your child/children to the local library. 2. Read a good book and then have a family discussion about it. 3. Take walks together. 4. Contact your Alderman and volunteer together. 5. Take your family to check on your elderly neighbors. 6. Spring clean your yard together. 7. Prepare a weekly menu of what the family would like to eat. 8. Plan or attend a family reunion together. 9. Go shopping together. 10. Rent the movie "Courageous" and watch it together.

From Brokenheartedness to Healing



By Robert Liscomb

I came to treatment with the shadow and clouds of DCFS hanging over my head. For the most part I was completely bankrupt: mentally, physically, and spiritually. I had given it my best shot, my best fight, and lost when it came to my addiction and the lifestyle I was living. I experienced losses that can only be defined as not getting any lower and the only thing missing was physical death. Of course I was already there spiritually; the rest was only a matter of time. With a one year old son I barely got to know and being involved with DCFS; I was fearful because of all the warning signs that I might not have much time left. Only God could understand my inner pain and that I needed a helping hand and see that I had my hands stretched out for his mercy and grace. Through his grace I was given the gift of honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness. I was given the courage to be a responsible father and an opportunity to be a part of the Partnering With Parents Cook County Regional Birth Parent Council Program at Haymarket Center. I listened and learned about the things I needed to know as a father involved with DCFS. I gained a hopeful state of mind and spirit, and began to change. I started to feel again. It wasn't easy, but I began to see myself as a responsible father to my children and productive member of society. My willingness to change caused me to embrace the steps I needed to take and one day at a time things got better. I am so grateful that I was introduced to the Partnering With Parents program through the Pathways To Responsible Fatherhood program at Haymarket; I can say...I'm at the beginning of my life's journey.

My Journey Through The System



By Evoria Williams

Hello, my name is Evoria Williams and I'm a resident of Forever Free Recovery Home Phase II program. I've been here for 16 months fighting to get my son back and I'm here to tell you that it can be done because I'm doing it with the help of some wonderful people here at the Recovery Home. My struggle hasn't been easy, but I can tell you that it is worth it. First I had to put God in the equation and stop thinking that I made all of these things possible when all the time it was God. My time is getting close, I'm now having overnight visits and I'm loving every bit of it. I got here at the Recovery Home and I got right into services. I did some research about different organizations. They were DCFS certified and I jumped right in on them. The services were Domestic Violence through Heartland Alliance and the other one was LSSI Connections Program for Anger Management. Both programs helped me cope and deal with life on life terms and for that I'm eternally grateful for them. Ladies and gentlemen, stay connected with your services and trust the process. Again, for anyone wondering if it can or could be done, I'm here to tell you YES it can be done. This is my journey through recovery:

Heartland Alliance-Domestic Violence

LSSI Connections-Anger Management

BPC HIGHLIGHTS

Fifth Annual Cook County Birth Parent Institute Day



*Partnering With Parents Staff:
Marsha Harris, Coordinator, Marnie Winston – Secretary,
and Donella Bishop-Ward - Administrator*

In June, Members of the Birth Parent Council along with DCFS sponsored the Fifth Annual Cook County Birth Parent Council Institute Day. The theme was, “**Keeping Our Kids: Managing Our Children’s Education**”



Keynote Speaker Robert W. Runcie

Runcie serves as Chief Administrative Officer/Chief Operating Officer and Chief Area Officer within Chicago Public Schools. His focus is on improving schools and developing capacity in Chicago neighborhoods, parents, and stakeholders for school reform.



Attendees and BPC Co-Chair Leon Alexander

One hundred and Fifty participants were in attendance which included birth parents and staff. It was a day of information sharing which was available in workshop sessions and exhibitors tables. At every institute DCFS provides content experts, who are available to assist with issues about court and child welfare resources.

2011 Workshops Included:

- Special Schools
- Student Transportation
- Youth and Mentoring Services
- Homeless Youth Services
- Parent Involvement and Advocacy
- Special Education
- Child and Family Benefits
- Dawson Technical Institute – Adult Ed/GED Programs
- Health, Wellness and Nutrition



Parent receiving an award

Birth Parent Presentations

Birth parents continue to be on the move and are making a difference in for other birth parents and child welfare workers. Here are our stats:

- 33 parents attended the Birth Parent In-Service Training session, "Handling Acting Out Children"
- Two Parents presented at the 23rd Annual Latino Institute in Lisle, IL
- Three parents were invited to present at Loyola University School of Law and School of Social Work
- Two parents continue to provide consultation to the University of Illinois School of Social Work Curriculum Development
- The Cook County Birth Parent Officers held approximately thirteen Core Birth Parent Council meetings, nine Cook South Regional meetings, and ten Cook Haymarket Center meetings during 2011
- Parents participated as members of the DCFS Action Teams in Cook County representing needs and concerns of birth parents and families
- One parent attended the Statewide Partnering With Parents Institute in Morton, IL

Foundations Trainings

Training of DCFS staff is an important part of becoming an effective caseworker. Birth parents have become a part of that training and in 2011 parents have presented their journey in the child welfare system to approximately 185 casework and supervisor staff.

Meeting With The Director

Core and Regional Birth Parent Councils met with the DCFS Director Erwin McEwen on a quarterly basis to address birth parent issues and concerns.

Service Appeal

Successfully completing services is an important part of children being returned home to parents and that is why parents should 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:

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



For three years in a row parents have enjoyed fun with their children at the State Fair. Twenty-four parents attended the Illinois State Fair in Springfield, IL in 2011



Going to a picnic to enjoy good food is always fun. Seven parents and their children attend the Cook South Summer Picnic.



"Take Me Out To The Ballgame!"
Fifty parents and their children attended the White Sox Ballgame during Summer 2011



Doing Family By Gregory Cox

I was given the opportunity to co-facilitate *“Conversation in the Barbershop”*, a workshop where the importance of fathers being in the lives of their children was discussed, whether they were in the care of the DCFS or outside of the department. This conversation caused me to reflect on a statement I made in an article I wrote in the May 2009 spring issue of the BPC newsletter: *‘Our goal as BPC is to see children not only come home but stay home’*. Now the question to ask is, how do we birth parents, social workers, case managers, community supporters, teachers, coaches, and pastors keep our children home? My story involved one little circle of drinking and drugging block after block and my not knowing how to **Do Family**. Although I went to family events with my parents as a child, I still didn’t understand the importance of taking my children to summer events, playing with them in the winter snow, or showing them what downtown Chicago looked like. When I got my children back these things became important to me. It has been 20 years since I reunited with my children, and I believe what worked for me and my family back then can very well work for other families today, and that was to become educated and informed about available community resources where I lived. I had to learn how to **Do Family**, and decide what that looked like for me. I encourage birth parents reuniting with their children to decide what **Doing Family** looks like for them. Not only is it equally important to take your children out as a family, but as a parent it is also important to take care of yourself by making sure you are using your support system. If you don’t have one, this is the time to **STOP** and evaluate your network. One of the main objectives of the Birth Parent Institute Day is to provide parents with tools to use while their case is open as well as after the case has been closed and the children have been reunited with the family. To answer the question of how to keep children home, I say it’s so important for us to make sure that we help families learn how to **Do Family**. It is not just spending time at home in front of a TV but learning how to spend time together away from home. I personally believe that a lot of my family’s healing came from spending valuable time together as a family, using community resources, and finding some alone time for myself so I could get the strength I needed to go back and finish the job of a father that cares for his family.

Working With Incarcerated Parents By Ramona Randall



Not all birth parents come into the system with the same issues. Some come because someone else hurt their children, some come because there is domestic violence, and some come because of substance abuse. No matter the reason it is a tough reality, especially if you are a parent dealing with both child welfare and criminal court cases. Haymarket Center has a unique program, Maternal Objective Management (MOMS), that serves addicted women who have children, are pregnant, or both and have been convicted of a crime. These mothers can be sentenced to treatment instead of serving time in jail. My heart went out to them because they can’t move around the center like clients in other programs and cannot participate in some of the special groups like Partnering With Parents which are held outside of their unit. I have had the pleasure of meeting with the women of MOMS who are DCFS involved and they really appreciate someone coming to them and providing support and answering questions like, “How does my having a criminal case affect my child welfare case?” My work includes bringing in DCFS staff experienced in working with parents with criminal court issues, to answer some of their questions, educating them on the child welfare court process, encouraging self advocacy, and using the Strengthening Families Illinois protective factors to equip them for success during the process and when their children come home.” It warms my heart to hear the progress they’re making by using what they have learned. When asked, “Why is it important to always do your best as a parent?” They said, “It is my job to do that. I am grateful for the opportunity to pay it forward.”



A MOTHER'S FIGHT FOR HER CHILDREN

By Sharon McDaniel

At a time earlier in my life, I was a mother of 11 children that did not know how to be a mother due to my thirty-year drug addiction. It was a time when drugs and the life style had such a hold of my life and I was not able to be a mother to my children. I thought of motherhood as sending the children off to school, I dressed them well and they ate well. I was only maintaining until I was not able anymore then I asked their aunt to take care of them and months later, she started back using. It was at this time that my children entered into DCFS care. I was so into my addiction, I stopped making court appearances and working with the caseworker, so therefore my kids were out of my life for more than ten years. During my absence, I learned of my children's adoption and the termination of my parental rights in Juvenile Court.

Also during this period, in 2003 I was arrested and locked up for a drug case and was sentenced to eighteen months. I successfully completed TASC services and probation, that is when my life changed, and I wanted to know what was happening in my children's lives. I went on with my life and now have a wonderful job and career helping others but I never forgot my children. It was only through grace and mercy that I saw two of my children walking down the street in May 2007 with their adoptive father. I turned around, approached my sons, and asked where they lived; I spoke to the adoptive father and gave them my telephone number. The adoptive mother called me the next day and she told me some inappropriate things, but it did not stop me. So a short time later, the family moved and she disconnected her phone so I lost contact with my children until April 2008 when my daughter contacted me. It was during this call that my daughter began to share with me the abuse they experienced for many years in the adoptive home. My daughter told me how they would tell the school officials what was happening but nothing happened to stop the abuse. I listened to my child and started seeking information and if it had not been for a therapist who was working with the children after they were removed from the adoptive home, from shelters, and many foster homes I might have lost them again.

In 2007, DCFS removed my four children from the adoptive home.

When the therapist mentioned my name to the judge at Juvenile Court and told of my interest in being part of their lives, a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) called to ask to meet with me. There were many questions the GAL had for me regarding my kids returning to me. I told her I would not stop fighting for my children. When my oldest son was sixteen years old, the foster parent beat him with an extension cord, and after the beating my son left the foster home and came to my home. To my surprise, the judge allowed him to stay with me until I got legal custody in May 2009 and he still lives with me.

The DCFS Service Plans Improvement and Foster Permanency Changes Act (HB529) allow the court and DCFS to review cases of children who are 13 years of age and over to determine whether the parents whose rights are terminated can be restored. Now that the laws have changed, a birth parent whose parental rights are terminated may be allowed to reenter their children's lives. I am fighting to get my sixteen and seventeen year old out of the child welfare system because they are still going through many challenges. I feel that I have to continue to encourage them and let them know that no matter what, I am never going to leave them again and one day I believe each one of my children will reunite with me.

It still hurts me when the child welfare professionals tell me that I do not have any parental rights but I am even more determined to fight to get my children out of the system. I now have contact with all of my children except for one daughter taken from me at birth; her adoptive mother was the only she has ever known. I never had a relationship with her; she was born addicted to Heroin at birth. My children still today endure a lot of anger, resentment, and distrust of others and at times will act to the point that they do not care about any consequences. And yes it does get hard at times and the frustration is my motivation to keep going dealing daily with the challenges and adversities.

Food For Thought

It is always important to show appreciation for the hard work people do and so the members of the Cook County Birth Parent Council would like to say thank you to Marsha Harris for working so hard to make the Partnering With Parents Initiative a success. Marsha was there from the beginning and to some parents, she was that voice calling on the phone as "The Tracker," seeking to keep up with parents and find out how they were doing. As coordinator of the birth parent program she was tireless in organizing meetings and events, among other things...she helped "Make Things Happen" for birth parents. In April of 2012 Marsha Harris retired from the Department, leaving behind a legacy of excellence and a spirit of concern about our families. We will miss her very much and will work to make her proud as we carry on the mission of "Making Things Happen, Keeping Our Kids."

Editor's View

By Ramona Randall

A lot of times we get so caught up in the excitement of getting our children back that we are surprised by the challenges that come with being together again. Some challenges are unexpected and can throw us for a loop if we don't stay connected to our support systems. To every parent that is experiencing the end of the "honeymoon" period of a return home and is facing tough challenges I say that the same strength that brought you through the process of getting your children back will take you through the challenges you face now. Don't be afraid to ask for help...it is the strongest thing you can do.



TELLING OUR STORY...MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Membership

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 Southside, Westside, and Northside 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

CASE SERVICES ASSISTANCE TO PARENTS

DCFS Office of Advocacy - When there are questions about services
800-232-3798 or
217-524-2029

Office of the Public Defender – For Legal Representation in Juvenile Court
2245 W. Ogden Avenue, 7th Fl.
Chicago, IL 60612
312.433-7047

Office of Inspector General
2240 W. Ogden Avenue
Chicago, IL 60612
312.433-3000

Resources

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, Homemakers
4800 N. Marine
Chicago, IL 60640
773.275.6233
**Call Salvation Army Core for Coat Vouchers
& Financial Assistance for Zip Code Referral to local offices*

Food Assistance

Greater Food Depository
773.247.3663 for 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

IL. Department of Human Services
Housing Assistance
Homeless Prevention
1.800.843.6154



BIRTH PARENT COUNCIL - CONTACT INFORMATION

**Donnella Bishop-Ward,
Program Administrator
773.371-6122**

Marsha Harris, Program Coordinator 773.371-6125

Rev. Terry LeNoir, Sr. , Chairman 773.317-9197

Ramona Randall, Media Chair 773.322-0827

**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*



VISIT US ON THE WEB...

Partnering With Parents

http://www.stateil.us/dcf/library/com_communications_statePWP.shtml

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