

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

A Newsletter for Birth Parents by Birth Parents

June 2011 – Volume V



Reclaiming Our Lives

Reclaiming Our Families

Reclaiming Our Communities

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GREETINGS FELLOW PARENTS

A WORD FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Reverend Terry Lenoir



Greetings fellow parents, as Chair of the Birth Parent Council, once again we should be very excited about where we have been, and even more excited about where we are going. First, on behalf of all Birth Parents we would like to thank Mr. Erwin McEwen, Director, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, for taking time out of his busy day to meet with us on a quarterly basis. As parents we appreciate Mr. McEwen's open and honest answers to the questions that are asked at our meetings and the follow up provided where needed.

As this fiscal year winds to an end we are pleased to hear that most of next fiscal year's budget will remain intact as it relates to services to parents and children. As Birth Parent Council member's part of our mission is to work within the frame of the Family Court System to help other parents navigate through the court maze and soon there will be parent mentors working with parents who express a need or make a court request. There are more things to be put in place to bring this about, but we know for sure there will be parent mentors working with parents to help support and encourage them to hang in there and do what it takes to get their case closed, and their child/children returned home to them.

As I move around our great city I have been privileged to interact with many types of providers, working to help our families become stronger. However there are some areas that could use improvement from all of us working in

this field, I would like to share just a little from a personal case that I am dealing with. Our children, boys as well as girls need to be encouraged at every age from the time they can understand words, because the words spoken to them will shape the life they will live. I ask us to please be careful of the seeds we plant when speaking to our child/children. Research has shown that if we call a child a certain name negative or positive long enough they will become what they are called. A few examples are you are pretty, you are handsome, princess, little king, you can do it, keep trying you will get it. These types of encouraging words will go a long way in changing the behavior of what we have labeled problem children.

As parents it can be very hard to admit that we have messed up or are messed up ourselves, but we have to surrender to the fact that we sometimes need help to get our life back on track, and if we really want what's best for our children then we should be willing to go to any lengths to make that happen. Remember it takes a village to raise our children in this day and age with all our children have to deal with just getting from one day to the next. So let's cover our children in love, patience, and understanding. The Birth Parent Council is looking forward to seeing all of you soon.

Our Mission

Our History

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.



A MOTHER'S FIGHT FOR HER CHILDREN

by Sandra McDaniels

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.

BPC HIGHLIGHTS

FOURTH ANNUAL COOK COUNTY BIRTH PARENT COUNCIL INSTITUTE DAY



The Birth Parent Council has experienced yet another success with our fourth Annual Institute Day that focused on Trauma. One hundred ninety-two parents, staff and exhibitors attended the institute held on June 4, 2010 at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, located west of downtown Chicago. The day began with council members performing a skit about the visitation process, which showed how important it is for child welfare officials to support parents and children during visits.

Proceeding was a general session in which keynote speaker Dr. Carl C. Bell, MD, President of the Community Mental Health Council spoke about the impact of trauma on parents and children. Dr. Bell encouraged parents to become a protective factor in their children's lives. Numerous workshops and exhibits offered resources to help parents focus on preventing trauma while involved in the child welfare system.



Registration Table



Skit Members: Eric Prater, Leon Alexander, Rev. Terry LeNoir, Jacqueline LeNoir, Cynthia Hoyler, Ramona Randall, Renee Littlejohn, Letitia Franklin



Dr Carl Bell



Exhibitors Table: Healthy Family Chicago, Family Advocacy Center

2010 Meeting With DCFS Director and Birth Parent Council Holiday Giving Program

December 17, 2010 the DCFS Director Erwin McEwen met with Birth Parent Council members to discuss parent issues and concerns. Also at the meeting, children received holiday gifts from the Department's Connie Payton Foundation gift giving and wishes program.

The parents actively involved in the Cook County Birth Parent Councils were able to submit a wish list in July 2010 on behalf of their children.



Something You Should Know:

The Differential Response Program Act (SB 807) became effective January 1, 2010 in the state of Illinois. Differential Response allows DCFS to take a more flexible and supportive approach to helping families in need of help but the risk of harm to children is low, DCFS is authorized to conduct a less disruptive family assessment, rather than a formal departmental investigation. This allows the Department to tailor services to support families and protect the children.

Who Qualifies For Differential Response?

- Families where the identifying information for the family including their current address, has to be known at the time of the report; and
- The alleged perpetrators must be parents, birth or adoptive, legal guardians or responsible relatives; and
- The family must have no prior "indicated" reports of abuse and or neglect; or
- Prior "indicated" reports have been expunged within the timeframe established by the Department for the indicated allegations; and
- The alleged victims, or other siblings or household members are not currently in the care and custody of the Department or wards of the court; and
- Protective custody of the children has not been taken or required in the current or previous case.

Some of the parents serviced by the Differential Response Program are attending Birth Parent Council meetings for support and information. Spread the word!

Foundations Training Birth Parent Presentations

Since 2010, birth parents that are members of the Birth Parent Council have presented to over two hundred twenty Foundations Training Students that are new to the child welfare system. Birth Parents share aspects of their child welfare journey with training students by telling them how to be effective caseworkers to their clients.

Below are some of the comments from the training students...

"This presentation was wonderful gave such a wonderful insight on the strength and support birth parents give each other and the true dedication for reunification."

"This was extremely insightful and will likely be one of my most memorable training sessions. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to hear directly from a birth parent what makes a good/bad caseworker; how difficult it is to be indicated, the emotion that goes with it and the pain of losing a child to the system."

"Even after many years in the field, it is always is helpful to re-focus on birth parents stories and see our services from their point of view. The speaker was very eloquent and did an excellent job. I think is a fantastic program."

"To all parents (birth) please keep up the good work and climb to success with your children and God bless all."

"Illinois is the only state I have done this job in that provides an opportunity to speak t parents. I think this is a great idea!"

"Please keep this as part of the training!"



Juliette Brown and Judith Flenorl



Elaine Haynes, Willie Mullen, Sr. and children



Parents enjoying crafts too!

The Cook County Birth Parent Council and the Chicago Children's Museum jointly sponsored a Kraft Foundation Family Free Night Outing at the Museum in September 2010 and again March 2011. Both activities were free to parents and children attending, there were a total of thirty-three in September and ninety-one attending in March. The Chicago Children's Museum provided free bus transportation to and from the event. Parents and children alike participated in many of the activities, tours, shows and crafts. Parents attending the events indicated they would like to plan another outing soon!



DON'T WAIT – GET INTO SERVICES!

By Evoria Williams

My name is Evoria Williams. I am currently a client at Forever Free Catholic Charities Recovery Home and my goal for me and my family is to bring us back together. My caseworker told me I had to participate in services and she made the referrals in October 2010. Therefore, I waited on referrals for services to come from my caseworker and nothing happened. Therefore, I called my attorney and explained to her about the referrals for services made by my caseworker and she called me back to let me know that my caseworker stated that they had not come back in yet – that my referrals were on a waiting list. My caseworker told me to be patient a little longer.

I was nervous about the delay in beginning my services and I knew that I needed to show progress when I returned to court so I began to look for the same services my caseworker told me I needed. I began to call and go to many different agencies and told them my situation and that I needed to be involved in services that are DCFS approved. The agencies agreed to work with me and I was told I could begin services with the approval of my caseworker.

On 11-24-10, I enrolled in outpatient treatment services at The Women's Treatment Center under the leadership of three wonderful women who on Tuesdays had Resource Day at the Women's Treatment Center. At this Resource Day, different people would come out talk about different services that are in the community such as Domestic Violence, Re-entry for Ex-Felons, and Anger Management, just to name a few.

I called my worker back to ask about the services identified at the Women's Treatment Center Resource Day since my referrals still had not come in yet. My caseworker stated that the service would be fine for me to attend. When I went to court, I took the documentation about the services that I am involved with like Anger Management, Reentry for Felons and Domestic Violence. I took copies of my documentation for the caseworker and my attorney. The judge asked me how I got into services so quickly. I told the judge that I like seeking out services for myself and I needed my ball to begin rolling so I could get my children back. The judge told me how pleased she was that I was proactive in finding services so I did not have to wait for the DCFS referrals for service and she told me to keep up the good work.

I am very pleased with my accomplishments. As a parent, you can help your case by staying in touch with your caseworker and your attorney if you are involved in Juvenile Court and ask about services when they are to begin and what the status of the referrals.

Do not wait, ask for other resources but make sure they are DCFS approved.

Here are some of the agencies I found that helped me:

- CSAC – South Community Service Advisory Council (Returning Citizens)
- LSSI of Illinois - Anger Management & Job Readiness
- Heartland Alliances - Domestic Violence



FOOD FOR THOUGHT – by Eric Prater



This is for the parents who are committed and determined to reach the goal of Return Home. DCFS (the alphabet people) wants to make parents better prepared to handle the awesome task of being the best possible parent you (U) can be. I know, because it happened to me.

Your children are precious gifts from God who places on us the responsibility to handle with care. If we fail, there is light at the end of the tunnel. By picking ourselves up and with faith, we will be able to overcome the difficulty, which is before us.

**"Winners do what they have to do,
Losers do what they want to do"**



Stay Connected

By Gregory Cox

For the men who will pick up this newsletter and for the women that care so much about them, it is my hope that you will be able to identify with something in this article or hear something that will encourage you to stay involved in your case. I am reminded of the challenges I faced when I started what I thought to be the longest and most painful process I have ever faced. However, I faced it, the process of trying to reunite with my children

I was coming off a 15-year binge/run of drugs and alcohol usage. My self-esteem was low and nonexistent; I was experiencing low self worth and little to no self-values; I thank God for a recovery program. I was determined to win this fight. Some might ask, what fight? The answer is the fight to get my children back and out of a system and prove that I could become the father that I always wanted to be. It was a fight to prove that people were wrong when they said all men are lazy and are no help and no support to their families or their community. Your case may differ, because of domestic violence, mental illness, child neglect, or just maybe it was a false report. If you love your children, keep fighting.

In the beginning, I thought that I was fighting only for my family. I understand now that I was fighting not only for the reunification of my family, but so that the voice of many men would be heard and that men will be treated fairly and be given the same services women receive when involved with the system. I understand that men are looked at as the stronger one, but there are times when men need assistance. As a man, it makes you stronger to ask for additional services you know you need, than to need them, and don't ask.

The Birth Parent Council (BPC) was started to help birth fathers and mothers become educated on what is going on in child welfare and how you as a parent can advocate for yourself. If you ask me why I stay connected, it's because if we don't speak up who will.



Editor's View

By Ramona Randall – Media Chairman

It has been amazing to watch the growth of the Birth Parent Council. As a member, I am honored to be a part of something that is helping parents who are yet traveling the road I once walked. Our stories speak to the strength of someone who has fallen, but gets up and overcomes. I encourage each and every parent who may feel the road is too long and hard to hang in there and give it your best. You can do this. It has been six years since my family was reunited and I am grateful to be there to help my children through sickness, graduations; the birth of grandchildren...the list goes on. You too have a future with your family and the opportunity to create a home. The experience of going through this process makes us stronger and that much more grateful for our families. It is wonderful to be on the other side of an open case...**NEVER GIVE UP!**

What It Takes To Be A Father

By Leon Alexander, Co-Chair Cook County Birth Parent Council



What does it take to be a father in these days we are living in? I believe the answer is in knowing what fathers and mothers learn instinctively in nature. Parents have a very strong desire to protect and nurture their children. There is a progressive nature in parenting to grow and mature and to protect the next generation. This desire in women is maternal instinct and in men, the desire is the protective instinct for the child and family, to provide for the family like in the old days when the man was the hunter and gatherer of food and thereby being a motivating force in the family and community. This motivating force or instinct in some men has been lost for decades.

So what happened? It began slowly during World War II when men went off to war and women stepped in assuming their role as provider, protector and motivating force in the community. Women, who had long sought for equal rights, became more liberated and less dependent on the men in their lives. Then as the war ended and men returned home, there was competition with women for jobs. It was difficult for many women to return to their previous roles. Then as the American economy began to deteriorate, both parents began to leave the home to earn a decent wage to support their families. All of a sudden, fathers found their original roles were blurred and not needed. They were unimportant to the family. This resulted in what we have today in America – the dysfunctional family. Roles are blurred and mothers are carrying both roles as father and mother. When families become involved with the child welfare system, father's involvement is very low and the father may wonder what happened and how it can change.

For those fathers who find themselves on the outside looking in; the real question is, how may I approach this situation to re-establish myself first as a father to be recognized by the system and second, a father recognized by his family? Remember Fathers; the goal is to save the family, your protective instincts protect the next generation, and provide for the family.

How do we do this?

- 1) Get off the ground and clean yourself up. Engage in every service the child welfare system recommends that will help you to become the protector and provider for your family. Work to improve your condition, set goals for yourself like going back to school, seeking job training and learning about yourself. Most of all; decide to complete your goals! Moreover, when you do complete your goals share them with your children.
 - 2) Stop your complaining and take full responsibility for your situation. Be open and honest with the caseworker, your child and family. Acknowledge your faults and seek to cooperate, comply and correct the issues that affect your ability to be a father.
 - 3) Find yourself a clean and moral God or Law you can believe in if you do not have one. For many parents involved in the child welfare system, it is their faith that has helped them to overcome the challenges they faced as parents.
 - 4) After you have cleaned yourself up, give unconditionally to those around you when you can. Strive to be an involved father with your children and family; give of yourself, your time and energy. Work to be there with and for your children. Make the visits with them every time and be an encouragement to them. Ask questions about their homework.
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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, you would 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



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**BIRTH PARENT COUNCIL REGIONAL MEETINGS
@ COOK SOUTH
5:30PM – 7:30PM**

JANUARY 25, 2011

FEBRUARY 22, 2011

MARCH 22, 2011

APRIL 26, 2011

MAY 24, 2011

*****JUNE – NO MEETING BPC INSTITUTE*****

JULY 26, 2011

AUGUST 23, 2011

SEPTEMBER 27, 2011

OCTOBER 25, 2011

NOVEMBER 22, 2011

DECEMBER – NO MEETING

All meetings will be held at:

6201 S. Emerald

Chicago, IL 60621

Please call to register at 773-371-6097



BIRTH PARENT COUNCIL - CONTACT INFORMATION

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

Marsha Harris, Program Coordinator 773.371-6125

Rev. Terry LeNoir, 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

This publication is printed by IDCFS Erwin McEwen - Director