

# Dependency Advocacy Center Mentor Parent Project:

## SJSU Partnered Evaluation Project

Armando Chavez, Lisa Haun, Vanessa Kimball, Eva Ortiz, Wil Quintero, and Elise Rockey.

Laurie Drabble, faculty lead (laurie.drabble@sjsu.edu)

### Background

This mixed method research was designed to evaluate the Mentor Parent Program (MPP) of the Dependency Advocacy Center (DAC) in Santa Clara County, CA. The overall aim of this study was to identify and measure specific components of the MPP that contribute to positive client outcomes. Parental substance abuse is involved in between 60 to 80 percent of child welfare cases.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the use of “mentor parents,” “recovery coaches” and “peer partners” has increased as a strategy to improve parental engagement in addiction treatment and to improve child welfare outcomes.<sup>2,3,4</sup> In Santa Clara County, the MPP is an important partner in collaborative courts, such as Family Wellness Court (FWC) and the Dependency Drug Treatment Court (DDTC). The following research projects were designed to explore and better define the unique contribution of the MPP to FWC and DDTC.

### Research Questions

- How does the Mentor Parent Program (MPP) impact and contribute to Family Wellness Court (FWC) from the perspectives of different stakeholders, including clients and professional partners? What are the specific elements of the Mentor Parent relationship and process that make a difference?
- What are differences in needs and concerns of fathers and monolingual Spanish-speaking clients?
- Are there differences in frequency/duration of contact with mentors between parents who reunify and those who do not?

### Methods

We conducted focus groups and interviews with clients (5 fathers, 6 mothers who are English speaking and 3 fathers and 1 mother who were monolingual Spanish speaking); professionals across systems (n=18); and Mentor Parents (n=8). Client satisfaction surveys were collected from clients (N=74) and survey data were collected from FWC partners (N=19).

We also examined data from Mentor Parent Contact Forms, which included information about the topics discussed and length of each client contact by parent Mentor Parents. Specifically, we analyzed differences by gender in relation to both topics and overall time spent working with mentors using information from forms collected from all clients working with Mentor Parents who worked with clients in Family Wellness Court or DDTC (N=296). Finally, we examined reunification outcomes for a subset of clients who reunified at the close of their case (7 mothers and 4 fathers) and clients who did not reunify with their children (7 mothers and 5 fathers).

Data for reunification outcomes were extracted from case files of one attorney (randomly sampled for women and all cases for men). Narrative data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed for common themes. Differences in types of contacts (mean times each topic was discussed) and total time (mean of total number of minutes across all contacts) were compared by gender. Similarly, differences in mean numbers of contacts and total time were compared for parents who reunified and those who did not.

## Findings

### Key Themes about What Works for Clients

- Mentor Parents were valued for their shared experience, ability to assist parents in navigating through the system, and capacity for creating hope.
- Mentor Parents were equally valued by professionals for their capacity to create bridges between providers and clients, provide insights in case planning, and help educate partners.

Highlights of key themes:

Thematic Areas	Specific Themes
Encouragement and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouragement being redirected when discouraged and reminded by their mentor who has “been through it” that “you can do it” or “hang in there.”</li> <li>• Practical support - broker resources and to fulfill practical needs that service professionals might overlook or take for granted.</li> <li>• Emotional support, help to channel feeling.</li> </ul>
Guidance; navigating and building trust with the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance through the entire process – “They break it down for you.”</li> <li>• Availability and accessibility, including after traditional working hours.</li> </ul>
Shared experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared experience lays the foundation for a relationship characterized by honesty and trust, where both the client and the service provider can see themselves in each other and know there is a possibility for change.</li> <li>• Allows for a space free of judgment or shame.</li> </ul>
Role Modeling and giving hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Parents are examples of what the parents can become in the future and encourage the parents to see this possibility in themselves.</li> <li>• Giving hope – “to show us we can live a different and normal life,” as an alternative to feeling worthless and defined by the past.</li> </ul>
Bridges and Brokers to Professional Service Partners, Resources and Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Parents acted as bridges from clients to professionals. Professionals expressed this using similar terms and phrases to describe the phenomena. Some of the ways this was expressed were “they vouched for me” and “they broke down the resistance” and “getting the clients to trust the process.”</li> <li>• They act as “informal liaison”, “interpreter” or “translator” for the clients.</li> </ul>
Mentor Parents as Systems Changers and Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education of systems partners through training.</li> <li>• Facilitating changes in services; exemplified by educating partners about better addressing the needs of fathers.</li> <li>• Humanizing clients to providers.</li> </ul>

### Survey Findings

- Client satisfaction surveys were overwhelmingly positive. Average scores were between “agree” and “strongly agree” across all domains (35 items) of the client satisfaction survey
- Overall satisfaction with services received from Mentor Parent: **Mean of 4.64 out of 5**
- A few quotes from the client satisfaction survey about Mentor Parents:
 

*She basically knows where I’m coming from and what my feelings are about certain issues and why. She is realistic and is always there to help.*

*She shows me that I can succeed and gives me someone I can talk to and get a hold of when I need to. I know she’s there for me and my family!*

*My mentor mom provided a ton of support, answered questions and provided the example for success. She went through this and that shows me we can, too.*
- Findings from the providers were similarly positive and consistent with qualitative interviews. The following table summarizes some of the facets of the MPP that providers found valuable.

Table 1: Highlights from Survey of Professionals

Professional perspectives on Mentor Parents:	• Mean (SD) • 5 = strongly agree
• Provide clients with <i>personal support</i>	• 4.83 (.38)
• <i>Gain parents trust</i> in ways that other professionals cannot, due to their shared experience	• 4.82 (.39)
• Help parents <i>navigate through the dependency system</i> , including helping parents understand expectations and roles of different systems and professionals	• 4.72 (.58)
• <i>Encourage and motivate</i> parents to make positive life changes	• 4.65 (.61)
• Help parents <i>engage quickly</i> in recovery services	• 4.61 (.50)

### Differences by Gender

- Analysis of parent contact forms found significant differences in some topic areas by gender. Women had a greater average number of contacts related to parenting, housing, and healthcare than men; men had a higher average number of contacts related to employment concerns.
- Women had significantly greater number of contacts than men.
- Qualitative data found few differences in how men described their experiences; however, one father felt that women in general get better “treatment” than men do.

### Monolingual Spanish Speaking Clients

- Spanish speaking clients felt that the language barrier would have been detrimental if they did not have their mentor by their side. One client stated, “Even though I had an interpreter in the court it’s not the same thing as when you talk to your mentor. Many times the interpreter said something to me and I felt more confused.”
- Two father clients shared that they had a Spanish speaking female mentor assigned to them who helped them through the process of trying to reunify with their children. Interestingly, these two clients not only spoke passionately about their mentor but seem to be grateful towards their mentor for being a woman.

### Differences between Reunified and Not Reunified Parents

- A preliminary pilot study of 21 clients of the Mentor Parent Program found that the average total time spent in contact with Mentor Parents was significantly greater among clients who reunified with their children compared to non-reunified parents.

Table 2: Comparison of Reunified versus Non-Reunified Parents

	Reunified (n= 11) Mean (sd)	Non-Reunified (n=12) Mean (sd)
<b>Total Contacts*</b>	37.909 (13.360)	18.916 (13.352)
<b>Total Minutes*</b>	1174.363 (388.512)	628.083 (568.294)

## Implications for Practice and Policy

- The high value placed on the Mentor Parent Program point to the importance of sustaining the program and increasing access to clients outside of Family Wellness Court.
- Aftercare and the need for ongoing support to reduce risk of relapse and re-entry into the child welfare system were noted by both professional partners and Mentor Parents.
- The role of mentors as educators for systems partners in Santa Clara County and in broader contexts was valued and might be continued and expanded.
- In addition to high levels of support, encouragement and help navigating through systems, clients valued highly Mentor Parents' availability, even outside official working hours. Program funding and caseloads should continue to account for the importance of this high level of availability and support.
- Some key supports might be offered in group contexts, with Mentor Parents as facilitators and other clients participating. Some clients noted that guidance related to accessing resources could be offered in group contexts (if they are not already). This may also be appropriate in relation to other commonly cited areas highly valued, such as tips related to communicating with professionals or employment readiness/employment resources.
- Future research should explore reunification and other outcomes for all clients who worked with Mentor Parents.

## References

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4. Ryan, J.P., Marsh, J.C., Testa, M.F., & Louderman, R. (2006). Integrating substance abuse treatment and child welfare services: Findings from the Illinois alcohol and other drug abuse waiver demonstration. *Social Work Research, 30*(2), 95-107.

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