Parents at the Front Door in Family Court and Child Welfare: Developing Parent Supports in the Juvenile Justice System

Imagine you’re a parent and your child is arrested and taken to court. Your ears are ringing with legal jargon you do not understand. Suddenly, your child is handcuffed, shackled and sent to the detention center. You are left sitting in the courtroom wondering what just happened.

It wasn’t so long ago that this was a typical scene in family court. About ten years ago things began to change in Stark County, Ohio. Caring professionals from Family Court, Mental Health, Human Services, and other systems and agencies with parents came together to do business differently. These public systems worked together to create changes that would eliminate much of the frustration and confusion often felt by families. They developed a collaborative group that met on a regular basis to better coordinate all of the human services and develop the support services that families needed.

In 1993, the Stark County Family Council emerged from these efforts to provide a community infrastructure for all of the child-serving systems in Stark County. It was built upon a cross-system mission statement and guiding principles. Common protocols and processes were also developed so that families received services and supports from all of the county’s available resources.

Family Court was there from the beginning. Judge Julie Edwards says that, in fact, not all jurisdictions work well collaboratively. Judge Edwards believes family court judges can and should be supportive of such programs. “Historically, our agencies have been able to talk to one another. From what I understand, other jurisdictions have had turf problems,” Judge Edwards said. “We seem to have less serious turf problems than other jurisdictions.”

She said that in some jurisdictions, the family courts and the Department of Human Services are just in conflict with each other.

“It’s almost like a war,” she continued. “It’s going to take someone to step forward and say ‘Gee, we shouldn’t have to live like this any more. The idea is to get services to kids. Is there any way we can talk to each other and work this out and still maintain our roles.’”

In terms of Stark County’s philosophy, Judge Edwards envisions an increase in the delivery of services within homes so that a child does not have to be removed permanently. “That has been a change in preventative philosophy,” Judge Edwards said. “Obviously it doesn’t work all of the time. Sometimes we have to come to terms with the fact that endless resources are not available. If a family cannot make improvements, even with all kinds of intensive services, then we have to ask if the removal of the child is the answer. In some cases, with daily wraparound services, families have been able to turn their lives around.”

However, Judge Edwards commented that as Stark County’s jurisdiction grows in terms of people and number of problems, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain the collaborative process. “I think people ought to be aware that collaboration is a good idea and a necessary idea but, whether you are just starting out or you are trying to maintain an effort, it takes a lot of work.”

Family Court Administrator Rick DeHerr recalls the commitment that the systems made to invest in the process for families and children. By listening to families who had received services, it became clear that more supportive services were needed. Families were very good at supporting one another. As a result, parent advocates were trained and became an important part of the Creative Community Options process. “It just made sense,” DeHerr said, “when all of the service providers and systems worked independently, we were unable to truly help a family.”

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But with all of us coming together with the family, we were able to construct a plan that was strengths-based. And it worked. We were all on the same page.”

One of the first steps taken was the birth of Creative Community Options (CCOs). Simply put, CCOs are creative planning meetings for families who are experiencing multiple challenges. These planning sessions offer a time when the family and child can meet with advocates, professionals and other supportive people from the community. They often include juvenile court representatives, case managers, therapists, ministers, friends and others who seek positive outcomes for the family and are built on the strengths of all participants.

The CCO provides a vehicle to access a wide array of comprehensive community services and supports that meet the needs of the children and their families. The Team makes a commitment to put the family in the driver’s seat. The family is supported in this with services through the Parent Department of the Family Council. Parent advocates are assigned to support families throughout the entire CCO process. They not only help families articulate their needs and wants but also help them identify community resources.

Parent advocate Canice Tolin remembers the early development of CCOs. “CCOs were a big step taken by these systems that has involvement with families,” Tolin said. “It was also the first time that parent advocates attended the family planning meetings and had a say in what the outcomes would be for the families and their children.”

Often, parent advocates would accompany families to court as a part of the CCO plan. “For the longest time, I would sit in the waiting room with the family or in the back of the courtroom just offering support,” Canice recalled. “Then finally, after attending court for three months with a particular family and helping the mother through the experience, one of the magistrates asked, ‘Mrs. Tolin, what would your recommendations be for this youth and his family?’”

This was a turning point for the court. There was a realization that parent advocates were very beneficial to all. Now, parent advocates are introduced in the courtroom. In the majority of cases, they are asked for their opinion along with the other service providers as to the future outcome of the child and family.

The courts now request that families get involved very early in the case with the Stark County Family Council’s Parent Department (now known as FACES). Parole officers and intake officers are calling advocates to ask that they become involved with families before the case goes to court. By connecting the family early to a parent advocate, the family can familiarize themselves with how the court system works and have a clear understanding of what is expected.

“I remember one time when a child was sentenced to the Detention Center. The mother sat there and watched her son be handcuffed and shackled. She was visibly upset and wanted to kiss her son goodbye,” Tolin recalled, “The mother was told that she couldn’t touch her son as he was now in the custody of the court. That was very hard on her but we were able to explain this to her and offer much needed support.”

Parent advocate Carol Hershey is no stranger to the courtroom either. She is both a parent advocate and a guardian ad litem for Family Court. “I am very happy to see parent advocates in the courtroom,” Hershey confessed. “If it’s the first time in the courts for someone, it can be very intimidating and very scary. Many don’t know what an adjudicatory hearing is. It is helpful to have a friend who simply explains the procedure to you.”

Hershey continued to explain how fast things happen in a courtroom as well. “It all happens very quickly with a lot of legal terms that parents really don’t understand. They used to walk out of court and ask, ‘What just happened in there?’”

In some cases, a family may want the child to leave the home for the safety of the other children in the home. “Sometimes it is the second or third time a child had gotten into trouble. The courts have slapped their hands but the parents want the child to be accountable for his or her actions,” Hershey explained. “I remember a seventeen-year old youth who had been arrested for felonies four times. Each time the charges were reduced and he was sent home and put on probation.”

“There were a lot of underlying issues that had not come out in court such as drug and gang involvement. The parents reached the point where they didn’t feel safe and the younger children in the home didn’t feel safe either. A CCO was then court ordered for the child and I then became involved. I met with the family beforehand and leaned what they had been living with for the past three years. The issues came out at the CCO. As a result, the child’s extenuating issues were addressed.”
The CCO resulted in a drug rehabilitation program, an anger management program, and probation with a tracker to monitor his daily activities. What emerged was a child who became accountable for his actions, gained back his self-esteem and earned a 3.2 grade point average on his next report card.

Currently, the Parent Department has four parent advocates who attend all court sessions and several more advocates are in training. They provide a wide variety of services such as instructing youth on how to behave appropriately and show the proper respect for the judge before entering a courtroom. Still in other cases, they may explain the importance of the family’s case plan and what it entails as well as assisting low-functioning parents on improving their parenting skills.

The overall result in Stark County is that parents no longer find themselves sitting in the courtroom wondering what happened there. By developing parent supports in the family court system, children and families are finding the supports and services they need. The collaboration is working.

But whether you live in a city or a small town, every community is accountable to respond to the changing needs of children and their families. Systems can no longer go about their “business as usual” and continue to work in isolation. The rise of community collaborations has never been more urgent or important.

Stark County’s collaborative mission is a work in progress. As the community grows and the needs change, the challenges grow as well. As Judge Edwards said, “Whether you are just starting out or you are trying to maintain an effort, it takes a lot of work.” For additional information, please contact the Stark County Family Council: 800 Market Avenue, North, Suite 1600, Canton, Ohio 44702-1075; (330) 455-1225 (voice); (330) 455-2026 (fax).

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