

Mentors For Parents: A Best Practice In Dependency Proceedings

Santa Clara County was one of the first family drug treatment courts in the country when we started in the 1990's. Other than our visit to the first such court in Reno, Nevada, we had no model to work with. After a year or two the parent attorneys came up with a new idea. They hired a couple of successful graduates from the treatment court and asked that they be mentors for new clients entering the treatment court. At first almost every client was female, so they called them Mentor Moms.¹

That was 25 years ago. Since then, parent attorneys have continued to improve the program introducing several innovations to assist their clients. The program has increased the number of mentors, including mentor fathers, and was expanded it to include all parents in the dependency system, not just those participating in the treatment court.

Mentors for parents provide something that the dependency system does not have – someone who is not a part of the government child protection system. They have credibility with the clients that judges, attorneys, and social workers cannot provide. When they meet a client, they can say – “I have been where you are sitting now. I lost my child, but I worked hard, and my child is living with me now. I can help you be successful in this complex process.”

Mentors help parent clients in many ways. They contact the client outside of court. They explain the proceedings from the client's perspective. They attend family team meetings with the parent. They keep track of the client as no one else can, informing the court of transportation problems, employment efforts, and challenges facing the client.

Attorney Hilary Kushins has been a dependency attorney for over 25 years, both in the treatment court and in dependency proceedings. She works with Dependency Advocacy Center (DAC) in San Jose. She says:

A mentor is an integral and crucial member of an interdisciplinary defense team in the child welfare system. Because the ASFA clock begins ticking immediately, early engagement in the process and participation in appropriate services is critical. Mentors often know resources in the community and can assist client in accessing those resources that may not be a part of the court ordered case plan but nonetheless impact reunification.

We also use mentors in pre-petition (prevention) work. The Corridor program in an interdisciplinary legal team that serves parents involved with probation who either have an open dependency case or are at risk of having a dependency case. It is funded through adult probation. The First Call for Families program is an expansion of DAC's preventive legal services work and is also funded by the County. Its three-pronged approach uses a warmline to access the interdisciplinary team, Know Your Rights presentations to parents and community providers, and, when appropriate, the First Call team will provide individualized support for high need parents. Both programs are free and were designed to provide early defense support to families to prevent system involvement.

The Dependency Advocacy Center continues to improve the representation and support for parents involved in the child welfare system. They provide a model for other offices representing parents.

Endnotes:

- 1 You can see several short videos featuring Mentor Moms in the video section of my website – judgeleonardedwards.com. They are the last two videos entitled Santa Clara County Mentor Parent Program and Legal Innovations.



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