



Child Welfare Organizing Project

Community Connections

**Program Evaluation
Final Report
June 2012**

*Silberman School of Social Work
National Resource Center for
Permanency and Family Connections
Hunter College, The City University of New York*



The Final Report was prepared for
The Child Welfare Organizing Project
by

Marina Lalayants, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

Silberman School of Social Work

The City University of New York

2180 Third Avenue

New York, NY 10035

Tel: 212-396-7550

Email: mlalayan@hunter.cuny.edu

Website: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork>

The project was funded by the National Resource Center for
Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPFC) at
Hunter College School of Social Work,
The City University of New York.

NRCPFC is a service of the Children's Bureau – ACF/DHHS and
member of the T&TA Network.

Website: <http://www.nrcpfc.org>

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	5
Executive Summary.....	7
Introduction	10
Study Site	12
Methodology	13
Procedures	14
Goals of Community Representatives	19
Preserving families and child safety.....	19
Providing guidance.....	21
Offering emotional support	22
Making parents’ voices heard and combatting stigma.....	23
Parent Satisfaction with CWOP Representatives	25
Cases Brought to Child Safety Conferences.....	28
Child Safety Conference Outcomes	30
Impact of Community Representatives	33
Resources	33
Emotional support	34
Physical support	35
Mediating	37
Educating and navigating.....	39
Changing the child welfare system	40
Influencing parental behavior.....	42
Personal fulfillment.....	43

Parent Engagement	45
Barriers	45
Factors promoting engagement	50
Collaboration Between CPS and Community Representatives	63
Relationship descriptions	63
Challenges	65
Strategies promoting collaboration	69
Suggestions for the Future	72
References	75
Appendix A-Parent Representative Interview Guide	76
Appendix B-Parent Interview Guide	78
Appendix C-Child Protective Services Staff Interview Guide	80
Appendix D-Satisfaction Survey	82

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express her appreciation to Ronald E. Richter, Commissioner of Administration for Children's Services (ACS) of New York City, and Gilbert Taylor, Executive Deputy Commissioner of Child Protection, for supporting this study. Deep gratitude goes to John B. Mattingly, former Commissioner of ACS, and Jan Flory, former Deputy Commissioner of Child Protection, who were interested in this study and provided the opportunity to initiate it.

The author would like to thank Rafael Ortiz Jr., ACS Manhattan Borough Commissioner, Deborah George-West, Deputy Director, Beverly Ali, CFS Deputy Director, and Sonia Tye-Santiago, CFS Manager, who each honored the relevance and integrity of this study, contributed to providing access to CPS staff, and greatly assisted in the logistics of the study. Additional gratitude is expressed to Shanna Gumaer, Assistant Commissioner of Research and Evaluation, who provided support and facilitated the study approval process at ACS. A very special thank you is offered to all those dedicated child protection workers, supervisors, and managers who work every day to help the children and families of New York City and volunteered to share their experiences in the interviews.

This project would not have been possible without the input and support of the committed community representatives, staff members, and administration of the Child Welfare Organizing Project. The leadership and enthusiasm of Michael Arsham, Executive Director, and Allison Brown, Special Assistant to the Executive Director, were instrumental to this project; their vision for compassionate professionalism, commitment to excellence, and dedication to advocating for and supporting children and families is a true inspiration.

The author is indebted to the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections, especially to Gerald P. Mallon, Executive Director, for his guidance, wisdom, and generosity.

The hard work of research assistants, Caitlin DiSclafani, Gabrielle deFiebre, Jessica Pena, Barbara Ferreira, and Mariama Njie is gratefully acknowledged for outstanding data collection, management and analysis assistance.

Finally, the participation of parent respondents in this study is greatly appreciated. They openly shared their experiences and stories and voiced their opinions in order to impact positive change for other parents, children, families, and the child welfare system.

Executive Summary

This evaluation study was conducted in an effort to learn more about the innovative parent organizing model implemented by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) in East Harlem, New York City and identify the role and impact of CWOP community representatives on birthparents, families, and child safety conference outcomes. CWOP community representatives attend child safety conferences with the birthparents to provide them with emotional support, resources as well as information about their rights and responsibilities within the child welfare system. The community representatives who are familiar with the community and the resources available help parents as they take steps to either ensure that their children remain safely home or become reunified with them after a removal.

The study investigated perceptions of multiple stakeholders (i.e. birthparents, community representatives, and child protective services staff) about this model; examined birthparents satisfaction levels with CWOP representatives' services; depicted barriers to parental engagement as well as factors promoting engagement; and discussed dynamics in collaboration between community representatives and child protection services.

A mixed-method design was employed where both quantitative and qualitative data sources were used. Child safety conference outcome data were quantitatively examined at site where CWOP representatives participated in safety conferences (East Harlem, N=232 cases) as well as the comparison site (Central Harlem, N=293 cases) where there was no CWOP involvement. Additionally, quantitative parent satisfaction surveys (N=68) were reviewed to assess parents' satisfaction levels with CWOP community representatives' services.

The qualitative data were generated from face-to-face interviews with parents who attended child safety conferences (N=21), community representatives serving them (N=9), and child protection services staff (N=30) involved in the conferences. Although both quantitative and qualitative sources were used, a stronger emphasis was placed on qualitative data as it provided a deeper understanding and exploration of personal experiences of various stakeholders during the child safety conferences and their perceptions of the impact of the parent organizing model.

The examination of child safety conference outcomes revealed that there was a considerable difference in the percentage of cases resulting in remand between the two sites (15.5 percentage points higher at the comparison site than the study site). The study site where CWOP representatives operated had fewer removals, which arguably could be an indication of a decision-making that favored family-centered and family-preservation approach. While no further information was available on individual case specifics, circumstances, and possible intervening variables at each site, in general the cases were believed to be similar in their characteristics at both sites, which allowed for this comparison to be made.

The overall satisfaction levels by parents were very high ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .525$). Most were "very satisfied" (72.7%) and "satisfied" (24.2%) with representatives' services. In terms of the ways in which CWOP representatives impacted families, the following common themes emerged from each group of participants: providing *resources*, *emotional* and *physical support*, *mediating*,

educating and navigating, changing the child welfare system, and influencing parental behavior. Additionally, community representatives discussed the impact of their work on their own *personal fulfillment.*

Parent engagement is a critical and challenging task of child welfare, and meaningful parent engagement in a dialogue, service planning and acceptance of services are even more challenging in the context of non-voluntary child protection. Respondents felt that the *negativity towards the child welfare system* that originated from the stigma that surrounded families involved with ACS created the largest barriers in efforts to engage parents. Parents additionally reported that *attitudes of some ACS workers* reinforced the stigmatization they felt during not only the child safety conference, but the entire process. Additional barriers such as *prior negative experience* with the child welfare system, *a lack of knowledge about the role of community representatives,* and *cultural differences* were identified in the interviews.

Despite the factors that acted as barriers to parental engagement with community representatives, respondents explained the methods used to handle these barriers. The value of *shared experience* was heavily emphasized among the three groups of respondents. Having a similar background and involvement with the child welfare system as their parent clients, CWOP community representatives possessed a *unique understanding* of parents' situation, which assisted in communicating with them. All respondents united under the concept that the disclosure of personal history with ACS to parents facing child abuse and neglect allegations would positively influence their decision to engage with a community representative and accept their services. This "shared experience" helped representatives demonstrate to parents that they could relate to them and, in turn, be someone who parents could relate to. Through emphasizing their common history of ACS involvement they were able to develop a system of *mutual understanding, trust,* and *honesty* with parents. Additionally, having a prior experience with the system prepared CWOP representatives to better guide others through it. Knowing that CWOP representatives had successfully negotiated the child welfare system for themselves instilled hope for parents going through similar experiences; to some parents, representatives were viewed as role models.

Though being a critical feature, disclosure of the personal experience was not always as important as the knowledge, resources, and personal communication skills that CWOP community representatives possessed. Qualities of CWOP representatives such as being *personal, non-pressuring, non-judgmental* and *non-stigmatizing* were instrumental in establishing a trusting relationship with parents and promoted engagement. The importance of *differentiating the role of CWOP representatives and their non-affiliation with ACS* and *showing genuine support* were also frequently identified as critical elements to engagement.

Overall, the relationship between CWOP community representatives and CPS staff members was viewed as *positive.* The main challenge that representatives faced in collaborating with CPS was *a lack of knowledge and awareness about CWOP.* Other challenges that mostly originated from it included descriptions of *distance, neutrality,* and *a lack of interaction.* CPS workers were *receptive* toward the presence of CWOP representatives, once they understood their role and niche.

Community representatives and CPS workers each mentioned multiple strategies to promote collaboration between the two organizations. The themes prevalent in both groups concern the importance of *debriefings* and providing opportunities for *open communication*. CWOP representatives recognized that being present at meetings made them visible to CPS workers over time, allowed CPS workers know who CWOP and their representatives were, and learn about their role. They noted that being assertive, upfront, and making personal contacts with CPS was a successful way to establish a relationship with workers.

Finally, CPS workers and parents were asked to give suggestions to improve CWOP services. Respondents from both groups suggested *expansion* to other districts and diversifying the CWOP personnel in terms of language, gender, age, race, ethnicity and other characteristics to meet the increasing diversity of parent clients.

Both parents and CPS staff suggested that representatives worked on developing a more long-term relationship with parents: do follow-ups after the conference, have more time before the conference to meet and talk to parents, and be present at other ACS-related conferences. Numerous parents felt that the values and strategies implemented by the CWOP community representatives should be transferred to ACS workers in forms of trainings and education.

Overall, the findings indicate that parent organizing model promises to ease pathways through the child welfare system for parents by providing various types of support, resources and information and guiding them through the system. It is undoubtedly a step forward towards building a family-centered practice in a highly adversarial and legal environment. While parental engagement and cooperation are critical and desired outcomes in child welfare practice, the emotional support, hope and resiliency building are also essential elements for ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being.

Introduction

Social service providers have long agreed that client empowerment and inclusion in the service planning and delivery will result in improved outcomes for them. To increase parent engagement, there has been an emerging use of a “parent mentor” or “parent representative” who shares similar experiences as parent clients (Cohen & Canon, 2006). While this approach has been promoted, for example, in the education and mental health fields, there is little empirical knowledge on its effectiveness in working with marginalized populations, such as birthparents in the child welfare system (Mizrahi, Lopez Humphreys, & Torres, 2009; Singer et al., 1999).

Although it is especially difficult to engage parents who are being investigated for neglect and/or abuse, there is some evidence that meaningful parent engagement in service planning and delivery can lead to better permanency outcomes for their families, such as less placements.

(Anthony, Berrick, Cohen, & Wilder, 2009; Cohen & Canan, 2006; Mizrahi et al., 2009). Parent mentors could educate birthparents about their rights and responsibilities, refer them to appropriate social services, and model attitudes and sets of behaviors that may lead to empowerment, healthy families, and reunification.

Meaningful parent engagement seems to be most effective when done by a parent representative who shares the parent’s experiences of child welfare involvement (Cohen & Canon, 2006; Mizrahi et al., 2009). Parent representation is about meaningfully engaging parents and instilling hope. Cohen and Canan (2009) stated that “when help is offered by the right person in the right way, parents will respond” (p. 880). Using parent representatives who have successfully negotiated the child welfare system to engage birthparents and involve them in different stages of child welfare service delivery is likely to support permanency, community-based services instead of removal, and reunification of the child with his/her family (Anthony et

al., 2009; Cohen & Canon, 2006). An effective parent-to-parent program achieves its goal of parent engagement which can ultimately lead to improved outcomes for the children, youth and families that the child welfare system as a whole serves.

Since there are very few programs using this peer-to-peer model with community representatives in child welfare, there is a lack of empirical knowledge on the effectiveness of this model. This study will attempt to fill this gap by examining the effectiveness of parent representation in child welfare. Empirically proven, positive outcomes of parent engagement during child safety conferences would speak to the value and impact that parent representatives can have in serving the families involved in the child welfare system and add to the knowledge generated for the field of children, youth, and family services about the usefulness of meaningful family engagement.

This evaluation study aimed to (i) identify the impact of parent representatives on birthparents as well as child safety conference outcomes; (ii) study perceptions of multiple stakeholders (i.e. birthparents, parent representatives, and child protective services staff) about this model; (iii) examine birthparents satisfaction levels with parent representatives; (iv) detect the dynamics in collaboration among parent representatives, birthparents, and child protection services workers; and (v) discuss strategies for parent engagement during child safety conferences.

A Child Safety Conference (CSC) is a gathering of family members and child protective services to thoroughly discuss the safety concerns and make the best safety decision for a child (ACS, 2008). CSCs are held after an emergency removal has taken place to explore options when protective custody is being considered due to concerns for a child's safety or when legal intervention is being considered. While parents' cooperation in these situations is expected,

many of them often act defensively towards child protection workers; and being on a verge of losing their children, they tend to not engage into a cooperative relationship. As a result, decisions are often made without parents input and informed participation.

Study Site

This evaluation study was conducted to examine the role of the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), which is a unique and innovative project in East Harlem, New York City. Its mission is to transform the quality of services and increase meaningful parent involvement in child welfare service and policy planning. As part of the Community Connections program, CWOP trains and recruits parent representatives or, also called community representatives, to serve at child safety conferences in Community District (CD) 11 in East Harlem. These community representatives attend child safety conferences with the birthparents to provide them with emotional support as well as information about their rights and responsibilities within the child welfare system. The community representatives who are familiar with the community and the resources available can help parents as they take steps to either ensure that their children remain safely home or become reunified with them after a removal.

Most community representatives go through a rigorous six to eight-month training regimen at CWOP that includes courses in communications skills, community organizing and the inner workings of the child welfare and family court systems. The training is developed using the Parent Leadership Curriculum and delivered by the CWOP staff, all of whom have past involvement with the child welfare system. One key qualification of CWOP community representatives is that each of them has had ACS in their lives; majority has had a child taken by ACS; some were successfully reunified.

Funded by New York State Office of Children and Family Services, CWOP community representatives staff child safety conferences in East Harlem under a subcontract with the Center for Family Representation (CFR). An integral part of the CWOP service model is the linkage between CWOP and CFR. While CWOP cannot provide long-term social or legal services to the families they meet in the conferences, they can and often do refer them to CFR for ongoing services. Parents served in child safety conferences are also encouraged to attend the Parent Support Group at CWOP in East Harlem. This ongoing access to community representatives and services at CFR is a major differentiator between CWOP's child safety conference model and those offered in other NYC Community Districts.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the services provided by the CWOP community representatives, a mixed-method design was employed where both quantitative and qualitative data sources were used.

The quantitative data were extracted from existing *outcome data* from child safety conferences in Community District 10 and 11. CWOP community representatives serve child safety conferences in East Harlem (Community District 11) only. Central Harlem (Community District 10) does not have CWOP community representatives present and is similar in case characteristics to East Harlem, therefore it was used as the comparison site. The goal was to compare CSC outcomes in both districts where CWOP community representatives were present (CD 11) and were not present (CD 10). Additionally, quantitative parent satisfaction surveys were reviewed to assess parents' satisfaction levels with CWOP parent representatives in CD 11.

The qualitative data were generated from face-to-face interviews with parents who attended child safety conferences, community representatives serving them, and child protection services staff involved in CSCs. Although both quantitative and qualitative data sources were

used, a stronger emphasis was placed on qualitative data. While the quantitative CSC outcome data allowed comparisons in two districts, the qualitative data provided a deeper understanding and exploration of personal experiences of various stakeholders during the child safety conferences and their perceptions of the impact of this model.

Procedures

Recruitment of community representatives

A complete list of all community representatives was obtained from CWOP's Assistant Director; there were 9 community representatives affiliated with CWOP at the time of the study who were recruited to participate in the study. There was no sampling applied, all CWOP community representatives participated in the study. The recruitment was done on voluntary basis. Before the interview, each respondent was asked to sign a written informed consent form. The interviews took about 30 minutes; they were audio-recorded with the respondent's permission and then transcribed by research assistants.

The interview questions covered areas such as community representatives' personal experiences with the child welfare system, their relationships with parents who they served (e.g., engagement, resistance, etc.), beneficial as well as challenging aspects of their work, perceptions of their influence on CSC outcomes, and collaboration between the child protective workers and CWOP community representatives (see Appendix A-Parent Representative Interview Guide).

Recruitment of parents

At the end of each child safety conference with parents, CWOP community representatives handed out flyers advertising this study. The flyer briefly described the study and invited interested parents to call the Principal Investigator to participate in a face-to-face interview. Additionally, CWOP representatives asked for permission of clients in their database to be

contacted for research purposes by the researcher. Those who agreed were invited to participate in the study. A total of 21 parents participated in the study.

Before the interview, each respondent was asked to sign a written informed consent form. The interviews were conducted by the Principal Investigator or research assistants; took about 20-30 minutes; and took place at either Hunter College School of Social Work or CWOP, in a private environment. Respondents were offered \$15 as an incentive to participate in the study. The interviews were audio-recorded with the respondent's permission and then transcribed by research assistants.

During the interview the parents were asked to share their experiences with child safety conferences and the involvement of CWOP community representatives (see Appendix B-Parent Interview Guide). The parents were asked to comment on representatives helpfulness and types of support received.

Recruitment of child protective services staff

A roster of all CPS/CFS workers and supervisors at CD 11 was obtained from the ACS administration. The roster contained 40 names with their contact information. Potential respondents were contacted over the phone and invited to participate in a face-to-face interview. During the recruitment process, a number of workers were excluded from the study for the following reasons: transferred to another unit (2); had difficulties scheduling interviews or were on leave (6), and were new to the office and did not have exposure to CWOP (2). A total of 30 CPS staff members were interviewed for this study. The interviews took about 20-30 minutes and were conducted at the ACS office location in a private environment. The interviews were audio-taped with the respondent's permission and then transcribed by research assistants.

During the interview the caseworkers and supervisors were asked to share their experiences with child safety conferences and the involvement of CWOP parent representatives

as well as the dynamics in collaboration between them and CWOP representatives (see Appendix C-Child Protective Services Staff Interview Guide).

Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed to identify and describe the most significant patterns, categories, subcategories, and emergent themes central to this investigation. Analysis of the data of all qualitative research requires multiple simultaneous actions that evolve into a systematic strategy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 2002). For that reason, a blend of methods was employed to help capture the essential findings of the study. During the beginning stages of analysis, the interview guide questions were used as a theoretical structure to frame this research project. Next, a cross-interview analysis of the descriptive question(s) originally posed by the researcher was examined for each respondent. This enabled the researcher to identify salient themes, topics, and issues central to the respondents experience with the interview material.

The first task in qualitative analysis begins with a presentation of the descriptive data. This process began with the verbatim transcription of all audio-recorded interviews, resulting in manuscripts of 8-15 double-spaced pages for each participant. Two research assistants with competent typing skills, knowledge in social science research, and familiarity with the study transcribed the interviews. The research assistants were candidates for social science/public health degrees and received human subject's training certification prior to commencing the work.

Once the interviews were transcribed, the research assistants anonymized the data eliminating confidential information from the responses. The data analysis began with re-reading the transcripts several times so the researcher could get acquainted with the material and become immersed in the context. Then, content analysis of the data was performed, which commenced with open coding (breaking down, examining, conceptualizing, and categorizing the primary patterns and themes discovered in the data). The next stage of content analysis was axial coding, which is a set of procedures where data were put back together in new ways after

open coding, thus enabling the researcher to make connections between the core categories and subcategories. This stage focused on intense analysis connecting each category and theme. Finally, selective coding stressed the systematic connection of the core categories with other secondary categories and subcategories. Once an understanding about the main themes and core categories and subcategories was developed, a cross-case analysis of the data occurred. Dominant themes of each respondent's responses were grouped together, illustrating the relationships between concepts and themes.

Rigorous attention was directed towards the quality of the data collected to ensure that concepts and theories were generated inductively. This allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data and to draw conclusions, translate, and make inferences. The categories and themes were confirmed independently by the two research assistants.

Quantitative data analysis

Satisfaction surveys. At the end of each child safety conference, CWOP community representatives routinely ask parents to complete a paper survey rating the usefulness of their services. An open space is also provided to add suggestions and/or comments (see Appendix D-Satisfaction Survey). The agency implemented these surveys in January 2010. There were a total of 68 satisfaction surveys collected between January 2010 and February 2012. All available surveys were compiled into an Excel spreadsheet by CWOP. The Excel file was then converted to an SPSS dataset by the research staff for analysis.

Child safety conference outcomes. After each child safety conference at CD 11, CWOP representatives enter the case information into CWOP database/Excel spreadsheet. While the database contains information on various case specifics, for the purposes of this study only the following variables were used by the researcher: (a) case date, (b) CSC type/triggers for CSC, and (c) CSC outcomes. Data covering all months in 2011 was de-identified and used in this

study (CD 11, N=232). Similar variables were collected from the CD 10 cases for the same timeframe for comparison purposes (CD 10, N=293 cases). The Excel spreadsheets containing the outcome data from both CD 10 and 11 were converted into an SPSS file, and SPSS 19 was used to analyze the variables. Each variable was assigned a code. Given the nature of the variables, the main quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics (i.e. frequencies, measures of central tendency, etc.).

Protection of human subjects and data storage

As indicated earlier, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form in order to participate in the study and a separate consent form to be audio-recorded. Their participation was completely voluntary and confidential. Each interview participant was assigned a unique number. All identifying information about respondents was omitted or disguised. Only aggregate data is used in this report or any publications that might result from this study.

The Institutional Review Boards of Hunter College, ACS, and New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) have approved this study as part of a Human Subjects Protocol. Additionally, the CWOP Executive Director provided a written letter of cooperation, granting permission to conduct this study according to the procedures outlined above. A formal arrangement was facilitated by the ACS office in Community Districts 10 and 11 to share de-identified CSC information on the key variables for the purposes of this study.

FINDINGS

Goals of Community Representatives

Community representatives were asked to identify the goals they aimed to achieve in their role as parent advocates. Respondents listed the following: *preserving families and child safety, providing guidance, offering emotional support, and making parents' voices heard and combating stigma.*

Preserving families and child safety

Most community representatives clearly stressed their primary goal of keeping children safely home, preventing children from going into out-of-home care, and/or reunifying families. Representatives commented that they wanted to see children grow up in their own homes, with biological parents, and they wanted to promote healthy reunifications that resulted in no further involvement with child welfare services. Some of them emphasized the significance of this goal by mentioning it a number of times throughout the interview: “My goal is to keep children out of the system. That is my goal. To keep children in their homes” (CR 3). Similarly, another respondent stated, “We expect to accomplish less removals, definitely less removals—that’s one of our main goals, and if there are removals, that they stay in their communities” (CR 6).

While preserving families was an important aspect of their work, considering the safety of the child was equally essential. One interviewee clarified that although she preferred to see children with their biological parents, she would never want to keep a child in a dangerous or unhealthy environment. She further clarified: “My goal is reunification. But, I think not in all cases they all need to be home, you know. We do have moms that do beat our children to the

extreme where they need to be raised somewhere else in a safe environment” (CR 1). Another respondent echoed, “I want children safe at all times (CR 2).”

Community representatives clearly communicated their goals to parents who they worked with in an honest and straight-forward manner. One Rep explained, “We are clear about what safety and risk are all about. We are clear families need to be safe, we are clear about telling parents things they don’t want to hear” (CR 7). Another respondent added:

I keep it straight with my parents I come across: “I’m trying to help you. I’m not trying to hurt you. I know you want your children home or you wanna keep them home; but these are some of the things we have to do as parents to better the safety of our children” (CR 1).

When asked about the rewards of her work, one respondent defined it as seeing children who are not going into care and knowing that she was there to protect the rights of the parent. Interviewees further discussed the gratification and rewards of accomplishing this goal as follows:

When I see children that are not going into the care, that to me is like “Yes!” I feel so good. I feel like I’m the parent. And, I see the parent happy, and I see that no one is taking advantage of the parent ‘cause I was there. It’s just really rewarding seeing the family together. (CR 2)

...For my parents to come back to me and say “My kids are coming back home!” or “They’re on their way home!” I’m like, “Yes! We did it!” You know, that’s a good feeling. ‘Cause that’s how I felt with my kids. When the referee said “your children have gone home”, that was like I hit the lotto. That was my “wow” right there. So, seeing that on their faces, the crying part, and just being there... I still stay in contact with my parents that I’ve helped get their children back. We stay in contact with one another, just check and see how they’re doing, how their kids doing in school, if everything is OK, do they need anything... And I still keep that relationship with them even after everything is finished. I still stay in contact. (CR 1)

Providing guidance

This theme was divided into two interconnected sub-themes: *providing parents with information and resources* and *helping parents understand the child welfare system*. Interviewees explained that their goal was to help parents understand their rights, the process of the system and provide available, relevant, and accessible resources. In fact, when asked why she wanted to become an advocate, one of the respondents said:

I just wanted to help parents out who don't know nothing about the system, especially help them navigate, 'cause a lot of parents don't know nothing, don't know rights, don't know anything. That is what I do and that's why I love to do it (CR 5).

Respondents possessed and offered extensive knowledge about available resources and services in the community. One community representative clarified that her responsibilities involved "...helping parents find resources in the neighborhood so they don't have to travel from Brooklyn to Queens for parenting classes or whatever services they might need..." Another Rep explained that due to their existence as a community organization, they may be able to offer services and resources that ACS cannot.

Helping parents understand the child welfare system meant helping them navigate the system and know their rights as parents. CWOP Reps wanted to help parents new to the child welfare system because they knew what it felt like to be alone in the system, not knowing where to turn or what to do. Respondents believed they were accountable for informing parents of what they could and could not do, and what parents should expect as they progress through the child welfare system. Some community representatives acknowledged the difficulties that parents new to the system faced in terms of general knowledge about child welfare rules and regulations and the language used in case conferences. They commented as follows: "I will go to a conference and help the parent in the conference to navigate through the different terminology, help the

parent understand the reasons why they're brought to this meeting, to this conference" (CR 5) and "...make sure they understand their rights, that their rights aren't being violated... make sure they understand everything that's going on at that conference" (CR 6). Another Rep said, "I go with them to court; I sit in on their case conferences; I speak with their permission to the workers on their behalf to get more visits to see how services are going..." (CR 1).

Offering emotional support

Interviewed community representatives interviewees felt they had multiple duties to perform in order to reach their ultimate goal of family preservation. In addition to those outlined above, they depicted themselves as parents' "support team" and emphasized that they "were there for the parent." They emphasized their goal of providing emotional support, which involved *reassurance, empowerment, and communication*.

Every respondent recognized their responsibility to stress the shared experience with their client: to let them know they "have been there and have gotten through it", "they understand things that no one else can," and that "success is possible, no matter what." One respondent stated the following: "I've been there so I can be of some support and to assure them that they're not the only ones that have been through what they've been through. That other people make mistakes, too. There are people out there to help you to come around, to come through what you're going through" (CR 9). Another community representative further defined her responsibility to parent clients as follows: "Letting them know I've been there, so I understand the frustration, but we're gonna use the frustration on a positive note" (CR 1).

Community representatives encouraged and empowered parents to take charge of their lives and their case. One interviewee emphasized the following: "I get to empower other people

and, you know, they're happy that they don't have to go through this system forever and that someone is there to help them to actually understand what they're going through." (CR 9). Another respondent further explained that her role was "to give them [parents] a sense of empowerment... People feel powerless in this process 'cause workers will make you feel powerless, they will tell you that you can't bring families to the table" (CR 7). Because community representatives have had personal experiences involving CPS, they "know what it is like to feel powerless" in the system, and their goal is to empower their clients with knowledge and support.

Moreover, community representatives had the potential to be *role models* for parents currently involved with the system; they were people "who had been through the same situation, had positive reunification outcomes and wanted to help other parents earn positive case outcomes" (CR 7).

Making parents' voices heard and combating stigma

A third theme shared by the respondents involved a number of interconnected sub-themes such as making parents' voices and opinions heard, teaching them self-advocacy, promoting an opportunity for fairness, and reducing the stigmatization of parents by the child welfare system and society in general.

Community representatives discussed the impact their work had on families in the context of giving parents a voice and teaching them self-advocacy. One representative further emphasized the importance of "helping them [parents] advocate for themselves and showing that you don't need someone to advocate for you." Another one explained, "I want parents to get the rights that they need and the help that they need instead of taking them away, 'cause when you

do that, it's really not helping anybody" (CR 2). Described in the interviews as "leveling the playing field," fairness meant helping parents know and fully understand their rights, as well as having the opportunity to voice their concerns or opinions despite the feeling of stigmatization that most parents experienced.

One of the goals of the community representatives was to combat stigmatization. Traditionally, mostly due to policies, media coverage and personal beliefs and attitudes, parents whose children were remanded by the state or families who were investigated by child protective services became associated with negative conceptions, such as bad parenting, mental illness, neglect and abuse. As one representative stated, "Not every parent that gets the call is a bad parent. You can't judge one parent because of one parent's mistake" and then when probed about the reduced stigmatization of parents in the system, the respondent said, "Yeah. We're getting there, but we're not quite there yet. We're getting there" (CR 1).

Parent Satisfaction with CWOP Representatives

After each child safety conference parents were asked by community representatives to complete a brief satisfaction survey ranking their satisfaction of the CWOP community representative who staffed their conference on a scale of 1 to 4, “1” being “Not at all satisfied”, “2” – “Partially satisfied”, “3” – “Satisfied”, and “4” being “Very satisfied”.

A total of 68 satisfaction surveys were collected between 1/06/2010 and 2/13/2012; two form did not have a date (Table 1). The overall satisfaction levels very high, $M = 3.70$, $SD = .525$. Out of the 66 surveys with valid responses, 72.7% were “Very Satisfied,” 24.2% were “Satisfied” and 3% were “Partially Satisfied” with the CWOP community representative who staffed their conference. It should be noted that while the representatives try to have parents complete surveys after each conference, there are instances when parents, either being dissatisfied with their CSC outcomes or other reasons, choose not to fill out any forms. This can explain the low response rate and might skew overall results positively.

Table 1. Satisfaction surveys completed at CD 11 during January 2010-February 2012.

CSC Date	Frequency (%) N=66
January 2010	1 (1.5%)
March 2010	1 (1.5%)
April 2010	1 (1.5%)
May 2010	6 (9.1%)
June 2010	4 (6.1%)
July 2010	2 (3.0%)
August 2010	6 (9.1%)
September 2010	5 (7.6%)
October 2010	2 (3.0%)
November 2010	6 (9.1%)
December 2010	2 (3.0%)

January 2011	7 (10.6%)
February 2011	3 (4.5%)
March 2011	1 (1.5%)
May 2011	1 (1.5%)
September 2011	1 (1.5%)
October 2011	2 (3.0%)
November 2011	1 (1.5%)
December 2011	5 (7.6%)
January 2012	8 (12.1%)
February 2012	1 (1.5%)

In addition to the quantitative portion of the survey, parents were asked in an open-ended manner to (a) explain their level of satisfaction with the community representative and why they were or were not satisfied and (b) indicate in what way(s) the community representative assisted or supported them during their conference.

The most common reason for satisfaction with CWOP representatives was that they “explained things” to parents (35.2%), as shown in this response: “[The community representative] clearly explained procedures.” Respondents also listed helpfulness (24.1%) and supportiveness (14.8%) of representatives. For example, one respondent stated that “[The community representative] is nothing less than supportive in my case. She supported me, my thoughts, and my plans for the children. I agree and am grateful for this community representative.” Several respondents reiterated that they were satisfied with the community representative (13%, “I was very satisfied with the community rep”). Respondents also expressed their desire to work with a community representative in the future (7.4%, “I still want and need them to be there”) (Table 2).

Table 2. Reasons satisfied with CWOP representatives.

Reasons Satisfied with the Representative (% of responses-not mutually exclusive)
The representative explained things to me (35.2%)
The representative was helpful (24.1%)
The representative was supportive (14.8%)
The work the representative did for me was satisfactory (13%)
The representative was understanding (7.4%)
I want to work with them in the future (7.4%)

When asked how the community representative assisted or supported them during their conference, many respondents noted that their representative explained and made things understandable (35.2%). For example, one respondent stated that “She explained what a couple of the services was and how they could help me.” A number of parents mentioned the helpfulness of community representatives in general terms (31.5%) with comments such as “She was very helpful. Hope to see her again.” Another one stated that “She supported in telling me she was there for me. I was not alone,” a sentiment shared by other respondents who stated that the representative was emotionally supportive (18.5%). Parents acknowledged representatives’ ability to uphold their rights and advocate for them (13%) and ask/answer appropriate questions on their behalf (7.4%) (Table 3).

Table 3. Ways in which CWOP representatives assisted parents.

In what ways did the community Rep assist or support you during your conference? (% of responses-not mutually exclusive)
The representative explained things to me and helped me understand (35.2%)
The representative was helpful (31.5%)
The representative was emotionally supportive (18.5%)
The representative upheld my rights and advocated for me (13%)
The representative asked and answered appropriate questions on my behalf (7.4%)

Cases Brought to Child Safety Conferences

A number of key descriptive variables from the CD 11 CSC data covering 2011 were analyzed and are presented in this section. It was found that out of the total number of parent-participants in CSCs, only 1% did not want a CWOP representative present at the CSC while 99% did agree to the presence of a representative. One can contemplate that this can be attributed to the ability of representatives to successfully engage parents into accepting their involvement.

The most common risk factors identified in cases that were brought for a CSC were substance abuse (19.5%), mental health (12.6%), domestic violence (8.7%), and lack of supervision (8.2%) (Table 4). This finding suggests that families are in great need of extensive support and treatment services.

Table 4. Risk factors.

Risk Factors	Frequency (%) N=231 (not mutually exclusive)
Substance Abuse	45 (19.5%)
Mental Health	29 (12.6%)
Domestic Violence	20 (8.7%)
Lack of Supervision	19 (8.2%)
Child Safety	19 (8.2%)
Voluntary Placement	18 (7.8%)
Excessive Corporal Punishment	13 (5.6%)
Physical Abuse	11 (4.8%)
Educational Neglect	11 (4.8%)
Inadequate Housing	10 (4.3%)
Sexual Abuse	9 (3.9%)
Emotional/Verbal Abuse	6 (2.6%)
Medical Neglect	6 (2.6%)
Hospitalization	1 (.04%)
Other	14 (6.1%)

Respectively, families were referred to a variety of services to address their needs. The most common services that the clients were referred to were parental mental health services (12.7%), parental substance abuse treatment (9.4%), child mental health services (9.4%), and parenting skills for the parent (8.7%). A number of parents were advised to attend CWOP parents support groups (6.4%) (Table 5).

Table 5. Service referrals.

Service Referrals	Frequency (%) N=513 (not mutually exclusive)
Parent-Mental Health Services	65 (12.7%)
Parent-Substance Abuse Treatment	48 (9.4%)
Child-Mental Health Services	48 (9.4%)
Parent-Parenting Skills	45 (8.8%)
Parent-Support Group –CWOP	33 (6.4%)
Child-Educational Services	31 (6.0%)
Parent-Legal Services	30 (5.8%)
Parent-Domestic Violence Services	29 (5.7%)
Parent-Other	29 (5.7%)
Child-Other	26 (5.1%)
Parent-Housing	19 (3.7%)
Parent-Anger Management	14 (2.7%)
Child-Substance Abuse Treatment	14 (2.7%)
Child-Other Medical needs	12 (2.3%)
Parent-Basic Needs/Physical Environment	12 (2.3%)
Child-Basic Needs/Physical Environment	12 (2.3%)
Child-Anger Management	10 (1.9%)
Parent-Other Medical needs	6 (1.2%)
Parent-Sexual Abuse Treatment	6 (1.3%)
Parent-Employment	5 (1.0%)
Child-Domestic Violence Services	4 (0.8%)
Child-Housing	4 (0.8%)
Child-Support Group –Other	3 (0.6%)
Parent-Educational Services	2 (0.4%)
Child-Parenting Skills	2 (0.4%)
Child-Sexual Abuse Treatment	1 (0.2%)
Child-Support Group -CWOP	1 (0.2%)
Child-Legal Service	1 (0.2%)
Parent-Support Group -Other	1 (0.2%)

Child Safety Conference Outcomes

Child safety conference characteristics and outcomes were compared between two sites: CD11 (covered by CWOP representatives) and CD10 (not covered by CWOP) for 2011. While the data at CD10 was not as detailed as at CD11, some comparisons can still be made. The blank cells in the tables indicate that data were not available in that category.

Based on the available information, there were a total of 232 CSCs at CD 11 and 293 CSCs at CD 10 throughout 2011. The first table demonstrates the number of conferences that took place each month during 2011 at each site. Since some of the cases did not have a date, they were not reflected in the table below (Table 6).

Table 6. CSC frequency by month.

CSC Month	CD 11 (N=211)	CD 10 (N=293)
January 2011	22 (10.4%)	24 (8.2%)
February 2011	24 (11.4%)	35 (11.9%)
March 2011	16 (7.6%)	30 (10.2%)
April 2011	19 (9.0%)	28 (9.6%)
May 2011	14 (6.6%)	28 (9.6%)
June 2011	19 (9.0%)	20 (6.8%)
July 2011	10 (4.7%)	28 (9.6%)
August 2011	15 (7.1%)	18 (6.1%)
September 2011	21 (10.0%)	15 (5.1%)
October 2011	19 (9.0%)	16 (5.5%)
November 2011	12 (5.7%)	15 (5.1%)
December 2011	20 (9.5%)	36 (12.3%)

The next table provides a snapshot of child safety conference type identified by triggers that initiated it (Table 7). At both sites, the most common trigger for holding a CSC was one in which removal was considered.

Table 7. Conference type/trigger for CSC.

Type of CSC/Trigger for CSC	CD 11 (N=206)	CD 10 (N=293)
Removal Considered or CPS/Police/ECS Removal	95 (53.1%)	200 (68.3%)
Court Intervention	31 (17.3%)	79 (27%)
Request for Voluntary Placement	22 (12.3%)	14 (4.7%)
Safety Alert #14	16 (8.9%)	-
Court Intervention Considered	14 (7.8%)	-
Fatality	1 (0.6%)	-

When comparing the outcomes of child safety conferences at CD 10 and CD 11 (Table 8), remand was the most common outcome of a CSC at both sites, although a higher percentage of CD 10 cases fell under this category (58.4%) than in CD 11 (42.9%), making a considerable difference in the number of CSC cases resulting in remand (15.5 percentage points) at CD 10. These results revealed that the site where CWOP representatives operated (CD 11) had fewer removals, which arguably could be an indication of decision-making that favored family-centered and family-preservation approach. While no further information was available on individual case specifics, circumstances, and possible intervening variables at each site, in general the cases were believed to be similar in their characteristics at both sites, which allowed for this comparison to be made.

Table 8. CSC outcomes.

CSC Outcome	CD 11 (N=232)	CD 10 (N=293)
Remand	99 (42.9%)	172 (58.4%)
Parole to Kin or person identified as a family resource	30 (13.0%)	-
No Court (e.g., Family Preservation Program)	29 (12.5%)	43 (14.7%)
Parole / Parole to Respondent/ Article X Parole to Respondent	28 (12.1%)	-
Court-Ordered Supervision or Petition	24 (10.4%)	69 (23.5%)
Voluntary Placement	19 (8.2%)	10 (3.4%)
Remand with Relative	2 (0.9%)	-

Additionally, at CD 11 parents were asked if they were satisfied with the CSC outcome at the end of the conference (Table 9). The data showed that of the total of 135 parents who provided this information, 44 (32.6%) parents were "very satisfied" with the outcome of their conference, 27 parents (20%) were "satisfied", 39 (28.9%) were "partially satisfied", and 25 parents (18.5%) were "not at all satisfied" with the outcome of their conference. Unfortunately, comparable data were not collected at CD 10 on this variable.

Table 9. Parent satisfaction with CSC outcome.

Satisfaction Level	Frequency (%) N=135
Very Satisfied	44 (32.6%)
Satisfied	27 (20.0%)
Partially Satisfied	39 (28.9%)
Not at all Satisfied	25 (18.5%)

Impact of Community Representatives

Community representatives, parents, and CPS workers were questioned about the impact CWOP representatives had on families, child safety conferences, and the child welfare system in general. Multiple themes emerged from each group of participants, though there were similarities among responses. Respondents identified such prominent themes as providing *resources, emotional and physical support, mediating, educating and navigating, changing the child welfare system, and influencing parental behavior*. Additionally, community representatives discussed the impact of their work on their own *personal fulfillment*.

Resources

Community representatives frequently described the significance of their impact in making practical resources available to parents, such as concrete references to needed services. One representative argued that for a person involved with child welfare, when it came to resources, “you don’t know where to go and how to get it” (CR 2). They shared that their assistance to families extended into various areas, for example, finding resources for separated families or families that were on the verge of separation, parenting classes, and so on. An interviewee added that, “We tell them about the alternatives and supportive services to people who, actually, you know, can be wonderful parents” (CR 7).

Similarly, numerous parents mentioned the provision of resources, such as information and referrals to services (e.g., legal advisement) when discussing the impact of CWOP representatives. Some parents indicated that although they no longer had involvement with ACS, they continued to be in contact with their community representative due to the services and rich information they were able to provide. Parents felt that reps could yield useful information on

employment opportunities, welfare benefits and other support groups (outside the realm of child welfare).

CPS workers described CWOP representatives as being the *voice of the community*, being knowledgeable about the population of the community, and having exclusive familiarity with certain community programs and resources. A CPS caseworker described the role of Reps as being particularly important because "...a lot of times the clients that we service are not really aware of what's available in their community in terms of services..." (CPS 27) Another CPS staff member commented on the specialized knowledge of Reps and argued that,

Someone who's been through the services...can give them more outside resources, especially in that community, better than what ACS has. They know the little ins and out, they know the community agencies that we may not know or better work with because often times they're from the community, they live in that community and they know that community. (CPS 30)

Emotional support

Parents and CPS workers described the impact of having a community representative at the child safety conference in terms of the emotional support they provided for parents. Parents stated that CWOP representatives *encouraged* and *empowered* them to engage with their caseworker and in child safety conference. Empowerment contributed to parents' ability and desire to advocate for themselves, and in turn, increased their self-esteem. Parents described the ability of reps to make them feel comfortable and calm them down before the conference. Other respondents described their representative as a source of *strength* in an emotionally delicate situation. For example, as one parent claimed, her emotions would have escalated and would have perhaps caused a negative case outcome, if it was not for the support of the community representative:

I was more than willing to accept their help because at the time I needed that help and that support. I needed somebody to listen to me, to hear me, you know, I would cry out for help but it seemed like, it really was, like, my opinion didn't matter. And thanks to

these people [CWOP Reps] who gave you a chance to speak and voice your opinion and listen to you, and it helped me cope with the situation that I was in. (P9)

Similarly, CPS workers described emotional support in terms of *calming parents down*, *acknowledging their emotions*, *comforting parents*, *offering advice* and *just being there for them*.

One CPS worker described the emotional advantage of having a community representative present at the child safety conference as follows:

I think usually parents come in for child safety conferences, they're already scared, you know. They're already thinking, "there might be court, you're taking my kids; I have nobody there for me". So just having a community Rep there for them, it's helpful. More emotionally than anything. They just have somebody there they can just sort of turn to. (CPS 13)

Respondents recalled the difficult situations and emotions they experienced, and how their case may have turned out differently if a representative was not there to help them. Some argued they would have been lost without their community Rep and that they requested to have a representative at every ACS meeting they have had since interacting with one.

Many parents expressed the gratitude they felt toward their community representative throughout the interviews. One, in particular, said,

I appreciate everything that they done for me. I appreciate the help, I appreciate the advice, I appreciate everything. And I wish that they just keep up the good work because a lot of us out here do need that support, most of us are scared to ask for their help but we know we need this help or we need to talk to someone... I praise them, I do. (P9)

Physical support

Parents and CPS workers also described the support community representatives provided in terms of their physical presence at the child safety conference. Child safety conferences were noted as being a stressful, emotional and intimidating event. Parents, who were often stigmatized by others for being involved with the child welfare system, were usually uneducated

about the system, emotional, and often alone. Multiple respondents emphasized the importance of having someone “on your side.”

Though the parents were aware that community representatives represented an unbiased party that provided support and guidance to parents, many argued that just knowing that Reps were not part of ACS was enough to allow their presence at the CSC. They stated that just to have someone sit next to them and let them express their emotions and thoughts was extremely helpful. A respondent expressed gratitude toward her community Rep’s presence at the CSC as follows,

I was honored for somebody to have been there to represent me because at times I don’t know how to speak up and open my mouth without my mom being around. So I was happy to have someone there to represent me because they [ACS] have their whole table with their supervisors and everything and it felt much better for me to have someone too. (P6)

Another parent also emphasized the importance of having the representative physically present at the conference. She commented as follows: “The community Rep who attended my conference was really there for me…” and “I felt more comfortable when I had the Rep with me… I felt safe” (P10). A different respondent described the physical set-up of the child safety conference in the following way:

As far as the conferences, even the ones in the future, I would still like to have somebody there in my corner because with ACS, when you go to these safety conferences, it's like you got this facilitator, you have the ACS worker, which is right there is already uncomfortable, but then on top of that you have the supervisor. So it’s three people and then you’re by yourself, it’s like three against one person. (P11)

Similarly, when faced with another ACS meeting, one respondent described his community Rep as “armor,” and explained that when ACS denied the representative access to the meeting, he was upset because “y’all [ACS] got your people, I need mine, you know, so I had got very comfortable with her helping me with my situation” (P8).

CPS workers discussed instances of advocacy, engagement and general support to parents due to the presence of a community representative in the conference. Phrases like “sitting next to them”, “someone in their corner”, “someone neutral”, “someone other than ACS personnel in the room” and “someone who is not a professional”, were used in multiple CPS worker responses to express their perceptions of advantages for parents to have a community representative present at the child safety conference. One caseworker articulated the differences in regards to advocacy that occur when a CWOP representative is not present at the conference as follows,

What makes a difference is that there is an outside voice, but when there is no representative there, it just seems like we are just attacking the parent and that’s the way that they feel. It’s like there is more chaos and a whole chaotic process; it seems like it is elevated when there is no other person in the room. (CPS 3)

Mediating

Similarly, CPS workers recalled cases where the presence of a community representative was essential to the proceedings of the CSC and served a mediating role between the ACS and parents. Two caseworkers mentioned a situation in which the parent had a hearing impairment, and despite the presence of a translator, the representative was able to bridge the language barrier. The respondents’ examples were as follows,

I’ll give you an example, and this goes back a few years, when the CWOP worker was there. We had a deaf person in the family. The CWOP person was the first person who understood that the interpreter wasn’t really representing the family correctly, and the mother wasn’t being represented right by this interpreter. So we stopped the conference. I guess if she wasn’t there we would’ve probably been, would’ve continued and we really wouldn’t have been able to engage the mother for her full understanding... But stuff like that, she made a difference in that case. (CPS 30)

A conference that comes to mind is a conference in which the mother was hearing impaired. We had an interpreter in the room, but we found out though the conference in all the different gestures that the client was making that even though the person was signing, the person was signing very different from what the mother understood, so there

was still a communication problem. And I saw the Rep not even able to sign, bring that mother down, hold her hand, have conversation with her as best as she could, and actually she diverted, you know, the mother had been known to become very physical, and really wanted to reach out and have an altercation with the worker and she didn't and it was all because of how that Rep stepped in even though they didn't speak the same language at all. (CPS 29)

Though these scenarios are by no means typical, they reference particular instances in which the presence of a community representative was critical to the CSC outcomes. Other respondents suggested that due to the presence of a neutral party, the conference not only ran smoother, but ultimately allowed them to focus on safety concerns, not the stigmatization and stereotypes involved in the situation.

CPS workers also commented on the ability of community representatives to calm parents down and explain to them what was happening in a language that they could understand. They emphasized that parents seemed to understand community representative simply due to their non-ACS status. For instance, one CPS worker explained that,

One of the parents came in and she didn't really understand all our decisions or placement options and things like that, so the community Rep could break it down for her to understand. Coming from somebody else, even though we said it the same way, she took their word for it. (CPS 6)

Another caseworker elaborated that “The whole time I spoke to the mother with the same calm tone, she didn't want to hear anything I had to say. But when the community Rep explained the same exact thing to her, it just didn't come out of my mouth, she was a little more receptive to it, and it seemed like she understood what was being said as long as it didn't come from me” (CPS 3).

Educating and navigating

The final theme that emerged from interviews involved community representatives' impact in educating parents and guiding them through the child welfare system. Parents emphasized the roles community representatives played in educating them, navigating through the system, explaining the process of the CSC and what followed, assisting in understating the language used by ACS as well as understanding their family needs. More specifically, Reps assisted parents in understanding the multiple avenues that ACS and the parents would be required to pursue in order to ensure child safety and reunification.

CPS staff acknowledged the difficulties many parents faced in understanding the professional language used in the child safety conference, and how CWOP representatives were particularly helpful in translating the jargon. One worker commented, "Yes, I think all of us get caught up in ACS language, and CWOP helps us slow down and realize it" (CPS 23).

As previous literature dictates, parents are often unfamiliar with the jargon used during the multiple conferences they must attend. A few parents mentioned receiving a booklet or pamphlet that defined the most common terms and acronyms used by child welfare workers, but more interviewees argued their Rep made sure they understood everything that was said in the conference right then and there. They commented on the ability of community representatives to speak their language and explain things to them in a way they could understand. One parent elaborated that her Rep, "asked ACS people to explain to me what everything meant, cause I didn't know what remand meant" (P21). Similarly, a respondent depicted the communication she had with her Rep as, "The CWOP worker was explaining to me the way I would explain to one of my friends" (P6). Another parent described a situation where though she understood the

literal meaning of the words used by ACS, in the context of the child safety conference it was necessary for her Rep to explain what the terms meant to her:

What ACS was saying, the bigger words like ‘paroled’ and, you know, certain words that they used, I understood the words, but they sound different. Like ‘neglect’, you know, I felt like I wasn’t neglectful but you know the advocate told me there’s a difference...in law terms neglect is different from the neglect that we would think outside of the law. (P14)

The majority of CPS respondents recognized the high degree of stress parents experience when interfacing with CPS not only due to the nature of the child welfare system, but also because most parents are uninformed about the process. Parents agreed that CWOP representatives were particularly useful in helping them navigate the system. One respondent in particular used the phrase “she guided me through it” multiple times during the interview, and argued that he would have said the wrong thing without having a Rep present, and felt more informed about the process due to having a Rep. Another parent expressed her thoughts on the benefits of having a community representative as follows, “...having a community Rep or an advocate next to that parent gives them the will and the power to navigate” (P10). When asked to describe some of the differences in the child safety conferences where community representatives were present and the conferences where they were not, one interviewee compared by saying, “I knew...I was stepping into the lion's mouth, but I knew how to get out this time. The first time [without a community Rep] it was kind of more like ‘oh my God.’”

Changing the child welfare system

Changing the child welfare system emerged from CWOP community representatives and CPS worker interviews. Though their observations were based on anecdotal data, community representatives talked about the perceived impact of CWOP Reps on family outcomes, such as

keeping children safely at home, less child removals and less out-of-home placements. In some cases, through their advocacy and presence at child safety conferences, Reps contributed to CPS workers' decision-making by reinforcing the family preservation approach. One Rep argued that because families are different, there should be more options available to them, and CWOP Reps have established multiple avenues for parents to receive the services and support needed to produce positive outcomes. One representative depicted the impact of her work as follows:

I think there are some child protection workers who like to use mental health challenges as a means to say that they can't parent. They like to infer that. And we don't allow that. We tell them about the alternatives and supportive services to people, who, actually, you know, can be wonderful parents. Some child protection workers don't understand domestic violence even though we have Nicholson legislation in place. They still don't understand the dynamics; they want to victim blame. So, we have to inform them of that. Then the court will inform them when they accept the case because it's in violation of the Nicholson (CR 7).

Respondents further noted changes over time in the ways in which parents were treated by ACS and the child welfare system in general, favoring the preservation of families rather than the separation of biological parents and children:

It's been rewarding to see changes done in the system because it seems that now even politicians and other people are listening to the parents. It's not just ACS workers... they're also hearing what parents have to say, which is important (CR 3).

CWOP representatives noticed the change in ACS processing, they recognized that parents were beginning to get their voice heard, and "ACS was starting to listen." One CWOP representative noted that "ACS is looking different. There is a consensus-based conference where your opinion makes a difference. You know your family better than anyone, and ACS is willing to hear that now" (CR 7). Another respondent agreed: "We made some leeway... for upcoming families who unfortunately get that knock on their door... It's like now parents have more voice, we have more parent advocates in agencies helping families" (CR 1).

Similarly, CPS workers felt that CWOP representatives were improving the traditionally negative perception of ACS. Many CPS workers commented on the stigma associated with ACS and on the lack of information parents had on how ACS operated. One respondent explained the influential role community Reps played in this as follows:

...I think they help families to understand what ACS really means to them. Families come in and there's a lot of emotions, they're very upset, often times they're angry. And for large systems that can be misconstrued as families not wanting to work with us, but you know, families have feelings about their children maybe being taken away from them. So they help to balance that out. I'm speaking specifically of the CWOP Reps, they're able to help families understand what that is, move beyond it and help them show up and be present to have a conversation with ACS about what safety is like for their child. (CPS 29)

Influencing parental behavior

Community representatives' role in inspiring and encouraging parental self-control emerged from parent interviews. Respondents experienced or at least recognized the intense emotions that many parents experienced at the child safety conference. They acknowledged the ability of community representatives to diffuse situations that may have resulted in a negative case outcome. For instance, parents explained that Reps prevented them from "letting their emotions get the best of them." One Rep elaborated by saying the following: "They [community representatives] basically teach you how to get over. They help you deal with ACS and teach you how to kill them with kindness." (P5). Similarly, another respondent described how the role of the community representative encouraged the concept of self-control during her child safety conference as follows,

She helped protect my rights and just make sure what you should say and shouldn't say, like you know "don't go in aggressive, I know you're upset". She gave me the play by play of everything that was gonna occur, starting at the meeting, like, you know when we go in, sign the sheet, everyone's gonna introduce themselves, they're gonna talk about the case and she just gave me a play by play, which was very good for someone just not going in blind-sighted. It's like you could self-incriminate yourself, or you know having

the support here like “listen, yes, you did this, and this is what you need to do to correct the situation.” (P12)

Personal fulfillment

Perhaps an unintended outcome, while CWOP representatives were motivated to help parents, the parent clients simultaneously and possibly inadvertently were helping the community representatives in multiple aspects of their lives. Motivation in terms of self for the community representatives concerned the underlying positive consequences the Reps gained from helping others overcome barriers that they themselves were once faced with. One respondent explained that her work as a community representative encouraged her to learn all the rights she had as a parent and all the resources that were available to her, things she “didn’t know where out there”, and commented, “I can’t believe I know the things I know now” (CR 2).

Moreover, Reps felt their work was beneficial to them because it helped them feel empowered, knowledgeable, and filled them with pride. One representative explained that it gave her “great pride” to see her clients be successful, knowledgeable parents. Similarly, participants described feelings of dependability as a result of their work. Another representative depicted her benefit as follows:

The benefit is just being there for them. You know letting them know that if you need someone to talk to, I’m there, that you’re not alone. That they can count on me. I try to be flexible as much as possible cause my schedule is busy as well. But I still reach out...my benefit is knowing that, if they really need me, I’m there for them. (CR 1)

One respondent further described the positive regard and overall satisfaction that she felt from parents:

Sometimes I see people in public and different places cause I am in the community and I work in the community places, so quite often I’ll see these families, and they’ll come up to me and say some kind words to me... (CR 5).

Interviewees enjoyed helping parents through emotional support, empowerment, knowledge and the provision of resources. One respondent commented that the benefits of her work were: “Knowing that parents have more options, that there is a more open forum to dealing with personal issues within the family, knowing that I made some of those changes through my own personal stories” (CR 4). Another respondent stated that her work reminded her of just how far she had come: “...it’s good to see for myself... It’s a growth for me cuz I’d be like ‘wow, I never wanna go back there.’ I can see where I came from... Helping others, I’m also helping myself at the same...” (CR 8).

Parent Engagement

As mentioned earlier, parent engagement is a critical and challenging task of child welfare.

Meaningful parent engagement in a dialogue, service planning and acceptance of services are even more challenging in the context of non-voluntary child protection. Respondents discussed a number of barriers to parental engagement and identified factors that promoted successful engagement.

Barriers

Community representatives, parents and CPS workers were all asked to explain why they felt parent clients would be reluctant or hesitant to engage with CWOP community representatives or the child welfare system as a whole. The factors that affected parents' ability to fully engage with community representatives were important to study. Learning about the reasons that may have deterred or promoted parental engagement with community representatives could shed light on what may have also influenced parental engagement with ACS or other court-mandated services.

One major barrier that was frequently identified throughout the interviews referred to the *negativity towards the child welfare system and ACS*. This originated from the *negative stigma* that surrounded families involved with ACS. Additionally, the *attitudes of ACS workers* reinforced the stigmatization that parents felt during not only the child safety conference, but the entire process. Other factors such as *prior negative experience* with the child welfare system, *a lack of knowledge about the role of community representatives*, and *cultural differences* were identified as barriers to engagement.

Negativity towards child welfare system and ACS. Multiple respondents talked a great deal about the *stigma* and *negative attitudes* towards the child welfare system and ACS, which partially extended to community representatives because of the misconception and lack of knowledge of their role. Child welfare involvement was traditionally associated with concepts like bad parenting, child abuse or neglect, drug use, mental illness, or other conditions, which in turn created stigma and influenced parents' decision to engage in services. Responses that depicted parents' perception of ACS included descriptions of the agency as "the bad guys", "the enemy", and "wanting to take your children". Some respondents felt the stigma of ACS was warranted: "I think that they [parents] view ACS as whole as a negative, you know, like connotation sort of to speak, and, I think that they just don't want anything to do with ACS, which I can understand because it is overwhelming to have an ACS case (CPS 21).

Similarly, community representatives discussed the difficulties they faced when trying to engage parents who did not trust anyone they felt were associated with ACS, including them. One interviewee discussed a recent case that involved this engagement barrier as follows: "It appears that her last contact with CPS was somewhat adversarial. So, because of that, she really had some trust issues at the beginning. She was very defensive." (CR 7)

Parental emotional state. The nature of the child welfare system was described as tense, confusing, and emotional for most parents, especially those new to system. Moreover, to many parents it was considered as a private matter. Parent clients were described as shutting down at the mention of ACS, and not wanting to share their story with yet another person. When asked about the challenges of being a community representative, one respondent described the hardships as follows:

I think the difficult part is...people being apprehensive when you try to approach them, share resources, when you know somebody who's been affected. I have gotten doors

slammed: “I don’t have no ACS, I don’t need that”. When you mention those three letters, everybody’s like “ooooh...” (CR 1)

CWOP community representatives argued that some parents did not want services they felt they did not need, and that having more people involved in their personal family business was unnecessary. Others felt ashamed and closed: “Some feel embarrassed, some don’t want to talk at all about it. They feel that it’s intrusive, that it’s nobody’s business” (CR 5). Another Rep explained that, “A lot of parents come in angry because they can’t understand why is ACS in my life, what did I do wrong” (CR 1). Parents who were in denial about their situation, or felt they did not need help navigating the child welfare system proved difficult to engage in informal and formal services.

The nature of the child protection and welfare system was filled with *tense feelings and emotions* depicted as being “angry” that their children were taken away and confused about how to go about getting them back. A community Rep elaborated: “The parents... within the first two sentences that come out of their mouth, they’re in tears, distraught...” (CR 6) One representative described the challenges she faced in working with families as follows:

Sometimes you really don’t know what to expect of the parents because when their children are removed, they really change their attitude. So, sometimes they’re really hostile, and you have to go in ready for the unexpected, and that’s the challenge because you don’t know what to expect. Is it going to be physical? Are they going to be verbally insulting? (CR 3)

Community representatives have had a personal experience with the child welfare system; therefore some of their responses in regard to the emotional nature of ACS involvement were drawn from their own history with this governmental organization. For instance, when asked how she became a Rep, a respondent discussed her emotional reaction to her case, “I was angry. I was very angry!... I didn’t care who I curse out, who I spoke to. I just didn’t give a hoot. ‘Cause my kids...system had my kids!” (CR 8).

Parents also described how the stigma associated with the child welfare system affected their initial relationship with their community representative in terms of *apprehension* and *trust*. Though all interviewed parents accepted assistance from their community representatives, most explained that they were just glad to have a non-ACS affiliated representative on their side, even before they learned the role and mission of CWOP community representatives. Other parents stated that although they eventually allowed the presence of a community Rep at their child safety conference, they were hesitant to accept help from a stranger. One interviewee's description of the emotions she felt at the time of her child safety conference and how that affected her decision to have a CWOP representative present was as follows:

It was very difficult to really just to ascertain what I wanted at that point, so I didn't necessarily approve or disprove CWOP's services right at that moment... I couldn't really decide whether I was gonna utilize CWOP's services at that point... I wasn't really going to decide if I was really, like, worthy of being a parent at that moment. That was just the emotional state. (P4)

Similarly, another parent explained that although she was willing to accept help from her community Rep, she recognized that other parents in need might not be inclined to accept help from someone they did not know. She further elaborated on her initial apprehensions and concerns as follows:

I was, like, "who is this lady and how did she know my name", like, "exactly how does that work? Are y'all affiliated with ACS?" Cause I don't know if most people would be as open to someone coming up to them calling their name. (P13)

Parents explained the need to trust the community representative (to some extent) in order to allow the Rep to become involved with their case. Parents expressed their concern about trusting their Rep as follows: "I didn't know if she was with me or against me" (P21), "...at first I didn't know who she was so I couldn't just trust you off top" (P19) and "I felt like I could talk to her,

not really trust so much, 'cause I just met her, but I felt like I was able to talk to her without being judged.” (P16)

Additionally, parents noted that this trust was non-transferable; parents’ trust of one community representative could not be transferred to another. A respondent claimed that each Rep had to prove their trustworthiness to their potential parent client: “So if she [the Community Rep] wants to introduce me to her co-worker, you know, it would be the same thing, I'd have to feel her out and see, 'cause you know what's good for you may not be good for me.” (P14)

Lack of knowledge about community representatives’ role. Another obstacle in parental engagement was a misconception or lack of knowledge about the role of the community representative. Reps argued that parents would be reluctant to engage with community Reps if they felt they were just another ACS employee or social worker. One representative explained that: “There’s this perception that ACS are baby-snatchers.” Similarly, other respondents commented on parents’ fearfulness toward ACS workers, and how the misconception of the role of community representatives as CPS or caseworkers could prevent parental engagement in services. In fact, Reps mentioned that they explained to every parent that they were not associated with CPS and that they were an independent organization advocating on behalf of parents. Some argued that “the first thing they did when meeting a parent for the first time was to make sure they understood that they were not CPS or a caseworker, but someone from the community that could help them.” They claimed that parents relaxed, opened up, and began to trust them after they assured that they were not part of ACS.

Cultural differences. Another barrier to parent engagement involved cultural differences, language, and customs. Cultural differences often impacted parents’ decision to engage with both formal and informal assistance. Reps commented on the importance of speaking the same

language of the client. One Rep explained past situations in which cultural differences caused parents to refuse her services:

I've only had two to tell me no. Both times it was families that were not English-speaking. I don't know what the interpreter was telling them, maybe it wasn't clear as to why I was there, they just seemed leery of me. One of them was I believe a Chinese family, the other one was an Indian family. So, they just weren't open. I guess because of the culture they just didn't want to involve anybody else. (CR 6)

Community representatives also experienced difficulties as a result of cultural differences when explaining proper parenting skills to parents. One Rep explained the following: "The challenge is to explain and re-teach that there are certain things that one can and can't do. Sometimes families have a hard time changing certain things" (CR 4).

Community representatives recognized the importance culture played in the field of child welfare. One interviewee stated that she bluntly told her clients what was an acceptable behavior in this society and what was not: "You in America. You do that in your country." (CR 8)

Factors promoting engagement

Despite the multiple factors that acted as barriers to parental engagement with community representatives, respondents were asked to explain the methods used to handle these barriers. These methods are important to identify as they make a distinct contribution to the knowledge on engagement of parents who are experiencing child abuse and neglect allegations. The value of *shared experience* was heavily emphasized among the three groups of respondents and was often referred to in positive terms. Shared experience provided a *unique understanding* of parents' situation as well as *dual perspective*. Qualities of CWOP representatives such as being *personal*, *non-pressuring*, *non-judgmental* and *non-stigmatizing* were instrumental in establishing a trusting relationship with parents and promoted engagement. The importance of *differentiating*

the role of CWOP representatives and their non-affiliation with ACS, and showing genuine support were also frequently identified as critical elements to engagement.

Shared experience. Every community representative explained that they had a personal child welfare case prior to becoming a Rep. All respondents groups agreed that having this personal experience with ACS was essential in working with parents. The respondents united under the concept that the disclosure of personal history with ACS to parents facing child abuse and neglect allegations would positively influence their decision to engage with a community Rep and accept their services. This “shared experience” helped community Reps demonstrate to parents that they could relate to them and, in turn, be someone who parents could relate to: “they know that I’ve been where they are today.” (CR 3) One Rep commented as follows:

I’m very open about my situation and my coming in contact with ACS and letting them know what it is: “I don’t know what you’ve been through, but I know what it is to deal with them [ACS].” Just to be able to relate some of the time is what comforts parents—having somebody there to be able to relate to what they are going through. (CR 6)

Another respondent agreed that is was critical “to have a person that personally experienced this, whose children were actually removed...” (CR 4)

Furthermore, some community representatives noted that through emphasizing their common history of ACS involvement they were able to develop a system of *mutual understanding, trust, and honesty* with parents. Reps mentioned that knowing what parents were feeling and understanding and the dynamics of the situation increased the authenticity of their work and helped gain trust from parents. Community Reps felt that through the disclosure of their past experience with ACS, parents were more willing to cooperate with them and possibly develop a trusting relationship. One representative depicted the benefits of revealing her emotional past as follows:

A lot of times parents don't want to talk about ACS. They kind of shut down. If they meet someone who's actually been through it and actually has custody back of their children, it makes it a little easier for them to open up and be honest. There's more trust. You build trust that way. We share many similarities. It kind of opens up that door a little bit. They might feel comfortable talking to me about things they may not say to their social worker because I have more of their trust, they feel their workers might use it against them, and me, on the other hand, is gonna help them overcome that and just focus on what you have to do to make yourself better and stronger so you can be a better parent to your children (CR 1).

As explained in the earlier section, because of the nature of the child protection and child welfare system involvement, parents come into child safety conference filled with tense feelings, emotions, and attitudes. Having a similar background with the parent clients, community Reps possessed a *unique understanding* of the situation, which helped communicate with parents: "I had to go down to his level in order to help him [a parent] understand that I knew where he was coming from" (CR 8). Similarly, another respondent noted: "I know what she's feeling or he's feeling. I know exactly what is going through your mind. They can't be like, 'You don't know what I'm going through' and I'm like, 'Yes, I do know what you're going through. I've been there, I've done that. I know it's hard'" (CR 2).

Parents also emphasized that the value of shared experience influenced their decision to engage with community representatives at the child safety conference. Though not every respondent knew of their Rep's personal experience with the child welfare system, they argued if they did, they would have forged an even greater bond with their representative. Parents who learned of their Rep's personal involvement with CPS stressed that it positively influenced their relationship in terms of trust, understanding and respect. Numerous respondents felt that their Reps' personal experience with CPS legitimized their position of advocacy and support. They explained that Reps "knew what they were talking about", "understood what I was feeling," and "wouldn't judge me." One parent further elaborated that:

The fact that they've been there and experienced similar situations that me and my husband were going through, that encouraged me to listen more and be more open to things and advice they had, you know. I was just there listening and, you know, just sucking everything in because if they've been there they could tell me a couple of things to help me out as well, because they're now in a more successful position. (P3)

Parents claimed they were more willing to be open and cooperative with their community representative than with other people who did not have an experience with the child welfare system:

The people that have had that experience are the ones that need to be around people like me. If the person has never been through a situation like I have, there is no need for you to be in my face because you don't know what I am talking about or what I'm going through. (P5)

Having a prior experience with the system prepared CWOP representatives to better guide others through it. One parent in particular discussed the differences between the extent to which a friend could help at the child safety conference and how a community representative could be of assistance with the following example: "You know, maybe you have somebody, like, let's say just a regular friend that comes by that did not have that experience, they wouldn't know how to step in and prepare you before you go in those conferences. Only someone that's been through an experience like that can better guide you on what to say, what not to say and to maintain calm" (P11). Similarly, another respondent compared CWOP community representatives to programs that employ former drug addicts as counselors and mentors:

...It's that impartial judgment to say okay I've gone through this, and you can. It's kind of an optimistic approach to it, you know. It's the same thing if you're going into a substance abuse program and people there were substance abusers and now they're working in the system to help other people who have the same problems (P4).

Parents who were not aware of their community representative's personal history with the child welfare system explained that though it might have been helpful to know, disclosure was not critical at the time. Some parents claimed they engaged with their Rep due to the types of

services they offered. Others mentioned that they assumed their Rep had had a similar previous experience, or else they would not have been so knowledgeable. Despite the lack of disclosure of personal history, parents engaged with CWOP Reps in the hopes of securing a positive outcome for their family.

Respondents argued that the similarities of past experiences influenced and strengthened the relationship created between the clients and the paraprofessionals.

CPS caseworkers and supervisors were also asked to comment on CWOP community representatives' role in engaging the parents. Most CPS workers felt that in some situations, CWOP Reps *fostered and encouraged parental engagement* in the child safety conferences. Although respondents had varying opinions concerning the degree of influence Reps had in terms of parental engagement, they acknowledged the importance of shared experience. CPS workers explained that because Reps had a similar experience with the child welfare system they were able to forge a relationship with the parents that professional child welfare staff could not match. Knowing that CWOP representatives had successfully negotiated the child welfare system for themselves instilled hope for parents going through similar experiences. The CPS staff members described the shared experiences of clients and advocates on terms of, "If I could go through it, you could go through it" (CPS 30), "light at the end of the tunnel", "role model", and "yes, this happened to me". One interviewee further elaborated, "They speak from their own experiences and own successes. Whatever it was they were going through they were able to overcome" (CPS 23).

Workers understood the boundary their lack of shared experience was creating between themselves and their clients. A caseworker explained that while she could try to imagine what it would be like to be in her clients position, ultimately she could not relate:

Because not only do they know the process, but they know about their emotions and feelings that come along with that. They've been through it. So, they know what the family is feeling. They know that they are afraid, you know. They wonder, "Oh my goodness. What's gonna happen in court?" They've been through the same emotions, the same feelings. So, they know how to address it with them. Whereas, you know, I could tell, "Oh yes, I understand you're just sad, you upset", and everything of that nature, but I've never been through the process. So I really truly do not know how they're feeling. But a person who has been through the process knows what they going through. And usually CWOP; they're very honest about it. Some of them have said, "You know, I have been through the process". And they're [parents] like "really"? So, you know, it's like a light switch. They trust them more. (CPS 15)

Dual perspective. CWOP community representatives and CPS workers emphasized the unique position they held between parent clients and government workers. Representatives possessed a dual perspective on the child welfare system which assisted them in engaging parents into a meaningful dialogue. They held indispensable knowledge on legal and other aspects of the child welfare system as well as had an exceptional understanding of the circumstances of parents and families facing child abuse and neglect allegations. For instance, one Rep remarked: "I feel, being that I went through this, I have an idea of what the parent is going through and now I can sit on the other side, so I can help them from both angles" (CR 3).

CPS workers emphasized the unique position of CWOP representatives that allowed Reps to convey the goals of child protection in a way that parents would be willing accept. CPS workers explained that ACS as an agency was unjustly misunderstood. They argued, "We want to do what's best for the child's safety" (CPS 1), and believed that community representatives helped dismantle the negative connotation surrounding ACS and its' employees. Because ACS workers were traditionally labeled as the "bad guys," Reps were able to prevent the continuation of the stereotype through communication with their clients. They explained the process, clarified misunderstandings, and ultimately defined the goals of ACS and CPS. One worker further explained it as follows:

Sometime parents are reluctant to engage in services because they're thinking, if I engage they're saying that I'm guilty. But then CWOP talks to them and says you know, if ACS believes that you need to do this, and it was a decision that we all agreed upon, and you agreed upon it, you need to move forward. So, this is an opportunity, 'cause it's difficult, you know, so they [Reps] get to talk to them on that level: "I've been through the system and you know, you may feel unfair at this point but the interest of that CPS worker's about the child and the child's safety", and they have a discuss with the parents. (CPS 28)

Personal and non-pressuring approach. All parents described their CWOP community representatives as *friendly, nice, and easy to talk to*. They emphasized the manner in which the Rep presented him or herself at the child safety conference as one of the main factors that contributed to their decision to accept their help. They appreciated the non-pressuring approach that community representatives practiced. One parent described it as follows:

She presented herself in a diplomatic way, that's how you would say it, very friendly, you know. And she gave me an option, "if you don't wanna talk to me, you don't have to, I can leave right now", you know, "but this is what they gunna ask you, and do you feel that you want my presence to stay or go?" So I had an option... I was like "well the way she's presenting herself", I was like, "yea, please stay..." (P8)

Parents acknowledged that Reps made sure they understood that their services were optional, and that they did not have to accept their help or have them sit n on the conference if they did not want. This was an important acknowledgment because in the child welfare system, the programs and services for parents were often a required, non-voluntary pursuit. One respondent commented on the optional nature of CWOP representative's involvement with the following example:

Well, it was all a shock to me - this whole ACS thing, and then she [CWOP Rep] walked up and she said "Hello, my name is so and so, you don't have to talk to me, if you don't want to, I can be here or I don't have to be here. I can go my way, or if you feel like you need help... or this is the situation, this is what they're gunna ask you this is the deal". 'Cause I'm all new to this. I'm like okay, and she made me familiar with what was going on, and she guided me through it, she was very helpful. (P8)

A number of parents noted the personalized approach that CWOP community representatives demonstrated and discussed its impact on their decision to accept their services. One parent described the following situation:

...She came up to me, she extended her hand and introduced herself, she called me by my name, like, that's very important, you know, other than "Ms. Johnson, it's time for us to go in the room", it was more so like, you know, "Ms. Johnson, what can I do for you?" Then she explained what her role was, who she was, so I was very comfortable... She walked in, she introduced herself to my youngest daughter, she shook my hand, she called me by my first name. You know, these things, I know I keep stressing but that means a lot to have somebody call you by your name. It was very different because she came to me as opposed to shouted out my last name from across the room. (P13)

Many parents explained that CWOP representatives' manners and overall demeanor encouraged engagement. Parents emphasized the high levels of comfort, mutual understanding and respect between themselves and the representatives. They described how Reps explained the services and support they offered and assured their presence at the child safety conference was on the behalf of the parent, in a way that both relaxed them and encouraged them to actively participate in the meeting.

Differentiating role of CWOP Reps and non-affiliation with ACS. Parents described feelings of relief upon learning that they had a neutral person willing to participate in the conference, someone who was not affiliated with ACS. Similarly, community representatives stressed the importance of communicating their role and differentiating their role as a community representative in the parents' eyes: "Sometimes they'll say, 'What's CWOP?' Cuz they don't know" (CR 8). Every respondent noted that in explaining the role of a community representative, it was critical that the parent understood they were a separate community organization not affiliated with ACS because of the existing negative reputation of ACS as "baby-snatchers." This helped establishing a comfortable and safe space for parents to engage with the representatives. One Rep noted, "Once you say you're not ACS, it's like a load that gets off of

them. I'm not ACS. And, that's when they open up" (CR 2). Other respondents added the following:

I'm there to let them know that I'm from the community, that I'm no way affiliated with ACS, 'cause they already feel uncomfortable, they're already going into a battlefield, and to have another person to have to say that they're with the enemy doesn't sit well with parents. But I am there to let them know that I'm there for them. I tell them that I'm there for them and I've been through that. I know the challenges of sitting at a child safety conference. (CR 4)

I am a community Rep from CWOP. I'm here for you. I'm here to give you support. I'm not from ACS. I don't get paid by ACS. I'm from the community, and my reason for being here is, if you allow me to be in your conference, to make sure you understand what is going on, and that you get the support and services that you need for you and your family. (CR 6)

Another respondent agreed with the above-mentioned engagement method and added humor as a strategy in breaking the ice: "I tell parents, 'You know, you could accept me in the conference and you cannot... I can go back to my office and go about my business.' They'll be like 'No, no, no. I want you to sit in the meeting'" (CR 8).

Overall, CWOP community representatives argued that this brief introduction could make a difference between parental engagement and non-cooperation with community representatives which can carry on to a child safety conference and to some extent affect its outcomes.

Showing genuine support. This theme consisted of demonstrating *compassion, honesty, and listening*. Respondents argued that by showing their willingness to support the parent client through these three main avenues parents were increasingly inclined to engage with them. Parents discussed the differences they felt between ACS workers and community representatives, in terms of ACS "just doing their job" and Reps "truly wanting to help someone." Being honest with clients about legal proceedings, the realities of the system, and one's own personal experience with the system were also stated as beneficial ways to engage parents. When asked

about the methods she used to engage clients, a community representative stated that “showing compassion”, “letting the parent talk”, “asking them questions”, and “giving them information,” all contributed to the establishment of a successful relationship between the community Rep and the parent (CR 7). Similarly, another representative elaborated and argued that “Once you start talking to them and listening to them, cause I just listen... it’s like a total difference” (CR 2). One community Rep simply said, “I don’t say much, cuz ...what can you say to a parent at that moment, just ‘I’m here for you to listen.’ That’s all I could say, and it’s powerful” (CR 8). Some parents felt that just talking to someone who would listen and take the time to explain any confusion, whether they had met them before or not, was all that they needed to allow a community representative in their conference.

Non-judgmental and non-stigmatizing approach. CWOP Reps were depicted as non-judgmental and wanting to know the parents’ version of events. One respondent explained this further by contrasting the different approaches of how ACS and CWOP handled her situation:

ACS was like “you did something wrong”, as opposed to saying “well, what could we do to correct the situation to get reunification with your daughter back in the home?” It was more like “well, you admitted to disciplining your daughter.... you were wrong”; it wasn’t like “what could we do to assist you as a parent?” as to where CWOP was like “well, why were you frustrated with her? Well, okay here’s a parenting class... here’s anger management...” ACS was more like “you did wrong, you did wrong, and your kids are out your home...” (P12)

Similarly, respondents argued that unlike ACS, community representatives did not make them feel like a “bad parent,” but instead explained that “everyone makes mistakes”. Numerous parents used the phrases “not looking down on you” and “not blaming you” when describing CWOP Reps’ approach. One parent continued by saying that, “...now my self-esteem’s up because of their help and just being around them is very comforting” (P5). In fact,

representatives often were described as people who conveyed optimism in a pessimistic situation:

Because you don't necessarily know that you're gonna make it out of that situation at that point. You want to believe that you're gonna get your child or your kids back. You want to believe that you can rectify the situation, and it's hard, it's hard to believe that because I mean there's no one in that room besides CWOP that had that approach to say, you know, "this could be rectified... you don't have to look at yourself as a bad parent and even if you are, first of all you realize it's not a black and white situation. There's no such thing as a perfect parent." (P4)

Multiple parents described the manner in which they were treated in the child welfare system as "guilty until proven innocent." Respondents reported that while the process of the child safety conference caused stress and frustration, the stigma they experienced from the workers resulted in shame and disrespect. Parents described feelings of guilt, blame and inferiority when they interacted with ACS workers, and feelings of optimism, respect and understanding when working with a community representative. One parent described the differences in attitudes towards parents between ACS and community Reps as follows:

CWOP is not condescending, period. They do not talk to you like you are a number. You are a person regardless of what the allegations are, you are a person, and with ACS you are a caseload, and you know it. I mean, you know this person is addressing you 'cause this is their job, and you get that vibe. They don't necessarily have to be unprofessional to have that correspondence. It could be very professional but it could also be very robotic. And, you know, just lack of human, very impersonal, and it's very dissociative. So the tactics are very different of how ACS handles things and how CWOP Reps approached me." (P4)

Another parent discussed the issue of stigmatization and how having the community representative present at the CSC made her feel more comfortable and at ease. She stated the following: "You're guilty until you're proven innocent in that room... So you're labeled entirely in that room. And, to have a non-partial person present, you can feel it; you can honestly feel the difference." (P5)

Nonetheless, a few respondents agreed that as a result of having a community representative present at their child safety conference, they developed an understanding of the system and a more positive perception of ACS. Some parents claimed their change in perception was due to their representatives' guidance, support and advocacy during such a critical and emotional time. Others believed that after interacting with their community Rep, they had a better understanding of why ACS operated the way it did. One parent stated: "It wasn't a bad experience... I don't want to go through ACS again but it wasn't a bad experience [Laughs]. The people that I meet I let them know about ACS, I try to explain to them that they are only there for one reason to make sure that everything is okay" (P1).

Communication. Many representatives felt that communication was critical to engagement. They explained that speaking the parents' language, figuratively and literally, was a useful strategy in encouraging parental participation. Figuratively speaking, Reps commented on their ability to speak to parents in a way that they could understand. Interviewees mentioned the difficulties parents faced with the terminology used by the child welfare system. One respondent explained that case workers, lawyers, and judges sometimes speak "in code", and she needed to be with the parent in the child safety conference to help them understand the language and terms used.

In the literal sense, a representative noted that her bilingual ability helped her engage parents who did not speak English. She described her engagement method as follows:

Mainly that I speak Spanish, that has a huge role in it too. A lot of immigrants come in and that's my main thing too that I work with a lot of immigrants. Since I speak Spanish, they feel so much more comfortable because they be like, "I went to a conference and everyone speaks English, and I had my interpreter, and I barely understood the interpreter." And I'm like, "I know, I can imagine it's rough" (CR 2).

Previous research argued that the number of immigrant families that become involved with child welfare each year is increasing, suggesting that the literal communication between parents and CWOP community representatives has the potential to become a critical engagement strategy.

Collaboration between CPS and Community Representatives

Community representatives and CPS workers were asked to describe the relationship they shared with one another. They were questioned about the attitudes they felt the other group perceived, the challenges of working with each other, and the strategies they used to overcome those hardships. Though the responses of the community representatives were generally consistent in their positive evaluation of the working relationship they shared with workers, the responses of CPS staff were more varied. However, in terms of challenges and solutions, the responses were quite similar.

Relationship descriptions

Community representatives argued that CPS workers viewed them as partners working together toward the same goal of child safety. One of them said, “They [CPS workers] always say that. That you’re a partner” (CR 5). Overall, respondents felt that CPS staff members were *positive* and *receptive* toward the presence of CWOP community representatives, once they understood their role and niche in the child welfare system. Some Reps claimed that in the beginning, they sensed a little attitude; they explained that CPS workers felt that CWOP Reps were there to tell them how to do their job, but once their position and objectives were understood, the workers held them in positive regard. One representative explained her perception of CPS’s attitude toward CWOP community representatives as follows:

From my experience and perception, most of the CPS workers and facilitators have rave reviews about us, they really like us to be in the room, they see the difference when we’re in the room. We have a few exceptions, but the majority of them have very good things to say about us. I know that at the conferences they’ll say, “It was really good,” “we were really glad you were in the room”, “thank you for the resources you had...” I’ve gotten really positive feedback. (CR 5)

Similarly, when CPS workers were asked to evaluate their professional relationship with community representatives, most described it as generally positive except for a very small number of respondents who felt community representatives were unnecessary and described their working relationship in a negative manner. In terms of positive collaboration, caseworkers used personal and professional examples to express their feelings about the relationship formed with CWOP representatives. One worker claimed that CPS workers and Reps formed a “healthy marriage between the two very separate and different roles that help families understand” (CPS 29). Many respondents chalked up the success of their working relationship to a mutual understanding of roles and the continued cooperation and professionalism of the representatives. A CPS worker expressed her perception of the relationship the two groups shared as follows,

Definitely collaborative: coming up with ideas together, not just “I think this” or “I think that”. I think we work together even when we don’t necessarily agree. It’s still respectful, professional. They are really good at getting back to you, calling you, letting you know who this family is and s on. (CPS 8)

Similarly, other respondents discussed the successful collaboration with the Reps in terms of their role within the community. One participant explained that,

The role of a community Rep is... it helps us build our relationship we have with community, with the parents, with our agency and the other service providers in the community. So it’s like a collaboration of a whole team, and I think they add an intrinsic piece because they help, support whenever we have any concerns, they participate at the conference, they bring their expertise as former parents to the table, working with our system in the past, so I think it’s very helpful to have them on board. (CPS 28)

In terms of their working relationship with community Reps, negative CPS responses included descriptions of *distance*, *neutrality*, and *a lack of interaction and collaboration*. A few CPS workers shared that they did not interact with community representatives nor did they have a relationship with them outside of the child safety conference. One worker added,

We don’t really have relationships with them, we have child safety conferences. If they are available to come, they come, and if they not, they not. Like, if I know one of them

that has been at a conference or that frequents the building, it's like, you'll say "hi" in passing. But other than that, there's no real relationship. (CPS 14)

Similarly, other respondents felt that their role as a CPS worker was completely separate from community representatives. They explained that "as a CPS worker I could care less about what CWOP says or whatever" (CPS 9), "I don't really work hand in hand with them or follow up with them afterwards, it's just during the conference" (CPS 6), and "they don't affect my work in any way" (CPS 22). Some workers explained that though they did not have any collaborative relationship with CWOP Reps now, they would like to develop one in the future.

Challenges

Though community representatives felt workers perceived them positively, they discussed numerous challenges they experienced while working with CPS. The majority of CPS respondents could not identify any challenges in their collaboration with community representatives, nor could they recall any specific tensions or disagreements between themselves or co-workers and Reps. Participants felt that most of the time (if not every time) CWOP representatives agreed with the decision made at the conclusion of the child safety conference.

One major challenge that community representatives faced in collaborating with CPS was a *lack of knowledge and awareness about CWOP*. Reps argued that if the workers misunderstood the role community representatives played in the child welfare system, they would be reluctant to include them in conferences or consult with them. One representative explained that "In the beginning it was a challenge because I think they thought we were trying to take over or... put them out or whatever it was that they were thinking..." (CR 3) Similarly, another community representative stated that she thought in the beginning workers felt apprehensive towards them "as if I was there to overrule or challenge their judgment" (CR 9).

In terms of the role community representatives fulfilled for the parent client, some CPS respondents could not identify the advantages of a Rep, which may have resulted from a lack of understanding of community representatives' role. These CPS workers described Reps as "just sitting there", "not influencing anything", "not doing anything for the parents", and "having no purpose". One CPS worker said, "I still don't see what they actually do. What are they going to influence, if the families don't really know them, and if they don't know them what help could they really be?" (CPS 7). Another one added:

The Reps have basically just been here as one more person participating in the conferences. Most of the time it barely seems like the parent was aware of the Rep... They are just sitting there to give the parents emotional support, I think. I never had a Rep say anything or I never seen a Rep do anything. So, I can't say what affect that Rep has on the parent. (CPS 5)

A few other workers pondered the benefits of having a community representative present at the child safety conference and described their role as an informant and motivator as "easy to do" and something a family member could have provided (CPS 9). One participant commented as follows:

They don't speak to them long enough. They don't engage them long enough. They don't give them different alternatives or put a plan in place. They are just going in and sitting next to them. They could have their aunt or uncle come in and rub their shoulder and say "it's okay" and give them a piece of tissue. (CPS 7)

Next, *issues of power* were found to be a major theme among the challenges in working together. This was reflected in CPS having the final ruling in a case and Reps' perceived lack of respect for parent clients from CPS workers. Both respondents referred to the limited role community Reps played in case decision-making. Reps further explained that it made them feel powerless at times as CPS ultimately had to make the decision concerning the case. For instance, one representative used a case scenario as an example of a conflict between the two organizations:

The issue was trying to get a rehab for mom, and they [CPS] didn't really agree on the mother-child program...They had the child going to care than to be with mom. I thought that would be a waste of time, if the child can't go with mom...There was some conflict there, but unfortunately they get their way, the child went into care, and the mother went to a residential program, but... it happens (CR 1).

Other examples from CWOP representatives' interviews further described feelings about negative case outcomes and the discouraging impact it had on their morale. One Rep explained the following:

Sometimes I do feel like, "Oh my God, I let the parent down"... I do get that feeling, and "is the parent thinking 'she didn't do what she was supposed to do?'" And I'm like, "I did what I came to do, I did what I could do, and I just have to leave it in the hands of the law" (CR 3).

Throughout numerous interviews, CPS workers articulated the ultimate power of ACS, that no matter what happened during the conference, the government agency wielded the decision making power. Although these discussions were frequent, most workers did not describe the legal right of ACS as negating the role of community representatives. Some CPS workers, however, felt that because Reps had no legal say in the child safety conference, they were unnecessary to have in the child welfare system. Responses included the following phrases: "what we say goes", "they don't have any say in the decision", and "they don't influence the situation one way or another". When asked if the child safety conferences where community representatives were present were different from the child safety conferences where the Reps were not present, a worker responded as follows:

There is no difference because the outcome is always the same, regardless if they put an input or not. If we choose to refer the families for services, that's us that do that, not the CWOP person. We do everything. (CPS 10)

This same respondent described Reps as "strangers," and suggested that ACS should "get rid of them." Other participants were not as straightforward; a different worker explained that although

Reps may slightly influence parental engagement, she was not really clear as to why the Reps were there (CPS 9). These responses are summarized quantitatively and presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Summary of CPS perceptions of collaboration and importance of CWOP services to parents.

Described CWOP positively when discussing both their working relationship and importance of services to parents.	18 (60%)
Described CWOP positively when discussing importance of services to parents , but negatively* in relation to their working relationship.	9 (30%)
Described CWOP negatively* when discussing both their working relationship and importance of services to parents.	3 (10%)

*Negatively described includes descriptions of “distant,” “nonexistent,” “neutral,” “acquaintances,” and claims of non-relationship.

In the context of the case outcomes, community representatives also mentioned the issue of CPS workers *having a pre-determined decision* about a remand order prior to the child safety conference. Perception of CPS workers already deciding to remove the child from their parents before even hearing the case seemed rather upsetting to the Reps. They argued that sometimes a workers’ personal bias could influence their decision to remove a child. One respondent explained it as follows:

Some workers were in these conferences with their mind set. They would go in like, “removal” in their mind set. And, no matter what I would say or what kind of different ideas I would give, you could feel that it was already their mindset. And we would get into little battles, which was not good for the family. CPS was like, “I’m ACS and I say they need to be removed.” And I’m like, “Maybe the kids do not need to be removed...” (CR 9)

Another major challenge of working with CPS mentioned by community representatives was the *authoritative approach* that workers’ practiced. Reps argued that some workers preferred the old policies of the child welfare system that did not promote parent participation and inclusion in the decision-making about the case. In Reps’ opinion, these workers did not approve of the more active role of parents within the system. They described challenges in working with seasoned

CPS workers and new workers because each possessed varying views on the importance and validity of having CWOP Reps present at conferences. One representative shared the following:

Are there any challenges? Yes. We still have CPS workers that are still in the old framework of doing the CPS. For example, before they didn't have these conferences. I have been told by a couple of CPS workers that they prefer the old way when there were no community reps, no social workers, no anyone to advocate for the parents in the conference. (CR 5)

Furthermore, community Reps reported instances in which they noticed *lack of respect* of caseworkers for their clients. This was portrayed by such examples as CPS workers texting and appearing uninterested during child safety conferences, as well as making negative comments to clients. Such attitudes were found to be “annoying” and “unprofessional.” One representative commented on the lack of respect from CPS workers as follows:

You know, sometimes the workers will, they'll come in and they're not supposed to be texting or anything with their apparatuses but they'll speak and text and they're not fully engaged in the conference and that does not feel good. It's annoying to me and I'm sure the parent does not feel good at all about it. (CR 5)

Similarly, other Reps commented on the blaming nature of CPS workers, and suggested that the stigma associated with parents involved in the child welfare system contributed to the challenges of working with CPS. A representative depicted the stigmatization of parents in the system by CPS workers as follows: “I've had workers that'll be like: ‘Well, you're not a good mom. That's why your kids are here and you are sitting there.’ Like, really? Did you just honestly say that to my client in front of me?” (CR 9).

Strategies promoting collaboration

Community representatives and CPS workers each mentioned multiple strategies implemented to promote collaboration between the two organizations. The themes prevalent in both groups

concern the importance of *debriefings*, *working together*, and *communication*. An additional theme found in the responses of CWOP Reps included *introducing oneself* and one's *objectives*.

Having conferences, debriefings and meetings held with CWOP Reps and CPS workers and supervisors provided an opportunity to further strengthen the working relationship with CPS, address challenges in collaboration, and discuss and resolve tensions. CPS workers described monthly debriefings as a way to make community representatives aware of policies and procedures, express feelings or thoughts about the child safety conference proceedings, and to encourage constant communication. One worker's description of the benefits of debriefings was as follows:

I think the debriefing opens communications, if something's going on let's try to work it out immediately, let's not wait, have a sense of urgency, anything that we can do to ensure that we help keep families safe, we need that open communication, that's key. So, I think CWOP Reps and my staff have that in mind when we can communicate. (CPS 28)

Communication between workers and CWOP Reps was fundamental in engaging CPS workers into a collaborative relation as well as overcoming challenges. Respondents argued that through *straight talk*, *mutual respect*, *honesty*, *patience*, and *understanding*, a successful relationship between the collaborating parties could be reached. One representative expressed her satisfaction with the relationship she had with CPS workers and elaborated as follows: "The relationship I have with some of them now, I don't really see anything more to add to it. You know, because the communication is there, the respect is there; that's the foremost" (CR 1).

Similarly, CPS respondents acknowledged the benefits of open communication and encouraged the use of "real talk" or "straight talk." They argued that through these methods of communication, honest opinions and thoughts from Reps and workers were expressed in a non-disrespectful and polite manner, allowing for an open discussion. A worker's explanation of the importance of communication and clear role definition was as follows,

Definitely understanding each others' roles. Communication is a key, when there's a misunderstanding or if things need to just be clarified... We do encourage straight talk at the table, so everything's brought out. It's not as if we're meeting, before or after these conferences to discuss any issues, everything's discussed right then and there. So, yes, definitely communication is a key. (CPS 26)

The method specific to community Rep responses included introducing oneself and the explanation of the role of community representatives and their goals. Respondents recognized that *being present* at meetings made them visible to CPS workers over time, allowed CPS workers know what CWOP and their community representatives were, and learn about their role. One community representative discussed how she felt her challenges with CPS workers were resolved as follows:

I believe it was resolved after, you know, we've done a few conferences together and they see how we work with the parents, so that it's not like we're just trying to keep all the children at home whether the parents are doing the right thing or not... The parents have to be doing the right thing for their family in order for the children to stay in the home... So, they see that we're on the same page and it's working out. (CR3)

They noted that being assertive and upfront and making personal contacts with CPS was a successful way to establish a relationship with workers. One respondent elaborated as follows:

I used to walk around and introduce myself to all of them, let them know who I am, what I'm here for, what my role is. That was a challenge, but eventually I met some supervisors that were welcoming us, some of the managers, you know, love us. They heard about our organization, and, you know, you have to, I guess, like in a relationship when you break the ice, it a little bit eases the tension, and then it's smooth sailing. I mean that many of them are very open or want to have a parent advocate or community Rep in their building. But it wasn't easy. Like I said, I had to introduce myself to everybody 'cause I would just sit there, and I had to do something... 'cause it's not going anywhere. Like "Use me, hello!!" that's how it was. (CR 1)

Suggestions for the Future

CPS workers and parents were asked to give suggestions for CWOP community representatives and ways of improving their services. Respondents from both groups touched on issues of expansion and diversity, though additional themes were found exclusive to CPS workers and parent interviews. Some workers described improvements in terms of services representatives provided to parents, while parents were concerned with their personal relationship with the representative and ACS.

Though CPS workers generally believed CWOP Reps were positively influencing the system (more specifically the child safety conference) and that the relationship formed with Reps was positive, they identified multiple areas of improvement. Most respondents described improvements in terms of *expansion*, *increasing diversity*, and *increasing services*. Multiple workers felt that not only should there be more community representatives working in the child welfare system, they should be available in more districts. One participant explained that,

CWOP serves CD 11 and this office covers CD 9, 10, 11 and 12. If CWOP can serve all of them, it can help all other parents we see. CWOP has everything we ask them for. All of us who do this work lack resources, CWOP is no different. I don't count that against them. It's all of our issues. We are all suffering from a lack of resources. Their utilization of what they have is excellent. If they keep doing that and can service our whole Harlem office it would be wonderful. A lack of resources doesn't mean a lack of ideas. (CPS 23)

Parents also recognized the need to expand representatives' presence within and beyond particular zones. They argued that there should be many more of them operating within the child welfare system, and that these representatives should be better known.

In addition to expansion, CPS workers felt due to the increasing diversity of parent clients, community representatives should also increase their diversity. Parents also commented on the advantages of having a representative that speaks the same language or shares a similar

background or personal history. CPS workers acknowledged the potential advantages of having a male representative available for fathers and Reps closer in age to their clients. One worker said,

They probably can hire some men, because they don't have any males. They can probably be a little bit more diverse, because we see families of all nationalities, all ethnicities, all type of socioeconomic backgrounds, and I think primarily most of the CWOP Reps are Hispanic women, and they're middle age. I think if they were more diverse, they could have younger Reps, older Reps but they definitely need to have a few men. We have a lot of fathers who could really benefit from that type of support. I mean historically ACS is not an agency that's recognized fathers, and we're trying to get better with that. We need men to show up to help the men, because we have a lot of them out there that want to do that but when it's time to have a conversation with a roomful of women, it kind of can fall flat. (CPS 29)

Similarly, parents thought it was important that community representatives be diverse, not just across gender, race, and ethnicity, but also in terms of situation. For instance, one respondent mentioned that she was a veteran, a single mother, and suffering from depression, and it was difficult for her to relate to community representatives that did not share such experiences. Similarly, other parents suggested that the incorporation of community representatives that had experience with domestic violence may be helpful in the future.

CPS workers also mentioned that Reps should follow up with their clients after the child safety conference. One CPS worker explained it with the following:

I think they could have more follow-up. I know sometimes in conferences they offer the parents a parent group or they offer to help out with service referrals, but I've found in my experience that they don't always follow up. I think if they follow up a little bit more and help them out more, it would be great. I mean, we can always make the service referrals, that's not a problem, but if they were to help them out more, give them a positive connection, in the community... (CPS 27)

Exclusive to parent interviews, respondents questioned if it would be possible to have *more time to talk* to their community representative, prior to the child safety conference. Although they accepted help from representatives, they would have preferred to meet with them a day or even a few hours before the child safety conference so they could discuss the process, roles and

necessary steps of action in more detail. Other parents explained that it would have been particularly beneficial to them if their Rep was present at all their ACS-involved interactions.

The respondent explained it with the following:

When you're going through the process of being investigated, until they close that case, you're gonna be stressed out those whole 60 days, you wanna be able to talk to somebody, and who better not to talk to every time they come to your home to investigate you within those 60 days than your representative, to go about these things cause not everybody can keep their composure... I think more time to communicate, I think even just to call for support would be beneficial to that person. (P11)

Multiple respondents felt that the values, tactics and strategies implemented by community representatives should be extended to ACS workers. They suggested that cross-trainings, meetings and discussions between the groups could be extremely beneficial for the parent and overall process of the child safety conference.

References

- Administration for Children's Services. (2008). *Child Safety Conferences*. NYC Children's Services.
- Anthony, E. K., Berrick, J.D., Cohen, E., & Wilder, E. (2009). *Partnering with parents: Promising approaches to improve reunification outcomes for children in foster care*. Final Report, Center for Social Services Research School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley.
- Cohen, E., & Canan, L. (2006). Closer to home: Parent mentors in child welfare. *Child Welfare*, 85(5), 867-884.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Mizrahi, T., Lopez Humphreys, M., & Torres, D. (2009). The social construction of client participation: The evolution and transformation of the role of service recipients in child welfare and mental disabilities. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 36(2), 35-61.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Singer, G.H.S, Marquis, J., Powers, L.K., Blanchard, L., Divenere, N., Santelli, B., Ainbinder, J.G., & Sharp, M. (1999). A multi-site evaluation of parent to parent programs for parents of children with disabilities. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 22(3), 217-229.

Community Representatives Interview Guide

Personal Experiences

- 1) How long have you been working as a Community Representative/parent organizer?
- 2) How did you become a Community Rep? What brought you to this work?
- 3) What are your responsibilities?
- 4) Does having a personal child welfare experience help you in the work that you do as a Community Rep? If yes, how? Please give examples.

Probes: - Does it help your ability to act as an effective Community Rep? If yes, please explain how.

- Does it hinder your ability to act as an effective Community Rep in any way? If yes, please explain how.
- Do you feel empowered? If yes, please explain.

Relationship with parents

- 5) Please explain the importance of the pre and post conference meeting between parents and Community Reps.
- 6) In your opinion, how important is the role of the Community Rep? Why?
- 7) How do parents perceive you when they first meet you?

Probes: - What are the attitudes of parents/families towards you? Please give examples.

- How engaging do you find parents towards you?

- 8) Is it difficult to engage parents/families? If yes, please give examples.
- 9) What do you do to engage them? Please give examples.

Benefits and challenges

- 10) What is your goal in your work with families? What do you try to accomplish?
- 11) What are the benefits of your work?
- 12) What is rewarding to you in this work?
- 13) What are some of the challenges/difficulties in working with families?
- 14) In your opinion, what is the impact of your work? In what ways, do you think, your work affects the families?

Collaboration with CPS

- 15) Are there any challenges in working with CPS workers?
 - If yes, what are they? Please give examples.
 - How are these challenges resolved?
- 16) Have there ever been tensions or disagreements between you and CPS staff?
 - If yes, around what issues? Please give examples.
 - How are these disagreements resolved?
- 17) What are the attitudes of CPS staff towards you? How do they see you? As a collaborator, partner, or somewhat a separate entity? Do the CPS workers know you personally? How have you developed your relationship with them?

18) What does it take to build a relationship with a CPS worker? What is it that you need to work well with CPS?

Probes: Supports? Structure? Formal arrangements? to make your collaboration work well

19) What changes would you like to see in your relationship with the CPS staff?

20) Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't discussed?

Parent interview guide

- 1) Have you heard of Community Reps *prior* to your last Child Safety Conference? Was it your 1st time meeting a community Rep from CWOP at the CSC?
- 2) Please describe how you met the Community Rep; describe the situation, the circumstances. How did she approach you? How did she introduce herself? What did she say to you?
- 3) How helpful was it for you to have the Community Rep present at the Child Safety Conference? In what ways? Please explain.
- 4) What kind of support did you receive from the Community Rep during and after the Child Safety Conference?
 - Resources? Referrals? Emotional support? Empowerment? Strength? Please give examples.
- 5) How willing were you to accept their help?
 - How difficult was it for you to engage with the Community Rep?
 - Did you trust her from the beginning? What did they do to engage you, to get you to talk to them? Please describe...
- 6) Did you know that they had a similar personal experience with the child welfare system? Did she tell you? If yes, when?
 - How did you feel about the fact that your Community Rep had a personal experience with the child welfare system? Did it help you relate to them better?
 - Was your trust of the Community Rep affected by knowing that they had personal experience? Why? Please explain.
- 7) If you've ever had a CSC *without* a Community Rep there, how was the process different this time?
- 8) What were some differences in the way the Community Rep approached you vs. ACS workers?
- 9) If we compare how the ACS explained the reasons why you were involved with the Child Welfare System as opposed to Community Reps, which explanation did you find easier to understand? Which one made more sense?
- 10) As a result of having a Community Rep, do you have a better understanding of why you were required to be at the CSC?

- 11) How much did the Community Rep help you understand the language that ACS was using?
- 12) How has the Community Rep's presence affected your trust towards child welfare services?
 - After you left the CSC, what was your perception of ACS? More positive?
Negative?
 - What was your awareness of your family needs?
- 13) Having the presence of the Community Reps, did it make you less afraid to speak freely to ACS staff?
- 14) Was the Community Rep able to help you understand the follow-up process-what happens after the CSC? (e.g. 20-day conference, court involvement, etc.)
- 15) What suggestions do you have as to how the Community Reps could be more helpful?
- 16) Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences with Community Reps at CSC?

CPS Staff Interview Guide

Background Information

- 1) What is your title?
- 2) How long have you been working in this position?
- 3) How long have you been working at ACS in total?

Child Safety Conference Process and the Role of Community Representatives

- 4) In your opinion, is the role of the Community Rep important?
Probes: If yes, how? If no, why not? Please explain.
- 5) If you compare CSCs, where a Community Rep from CWOP is present, with CSCs without CWOP, what are the differences?
Probes: In terms of the process? Parent engagement? Other differences?
- 6) From your experience participating in CSCs where Community Reps were present, do you think a Community Rep supports the participation of parents and other family members?
Probes: If yes, how? Please give examples. If no, why not? Please explain.
Probes: Is this important? Why or why not? Please explain.
- 7) Do you find that parents who have a Community Rep are more or less likely to engage with CPS workers than parents who don't have a Community Rep? Please give examples.
- 8) Do you think the involvement of Community Reps helps parents better understand the reasons for being involved with ACS?
Probes: What exactly do they help them understand better?
- 9) Do you think parents leave the CSC with a more positive perception of ACS, as a result of having a Community Rep?
Probes: Why or why not? Please explain.
- 10) Do you think parents gain a greater awareness of their family's needs, as a result of a Community Rep speaking to them?
Probes: How so? In what ways? Please explain.
- 11) In general, what are the advantages of having Community Reps? Please provide examples.
- 12) What can CWOP do to improve their services? Please give specific examples and suggestions.

Collaboration and Relationship with CWOP Community Representatives

- 13) Are there any challenges in collaboration with Community Reps?
Probes: If yes, what are they? Please give examples.
Probes: How are these challenges resolved?
- 14) Have there ever been tensions or disagreements between you and Community Reps?
Probes: If yes, what kind? Please give examples.
Probes: How are these disagreements resolved?
- 15) Do Community Reps typically agree or disagree with CPS decisions at the Child Safety Conferences?
Probes: Has it ever happened that they didn't agree with your decisions? If yes, what

happened then?

- 16) How would you describe your working relationship with Community Reps?
Probes: Positive? Negatives? Supportive? Collaborative? Please explain.
- 17) What is necessary to support your collaboration with CWOP?
Probes: What ACS could do to support your collaboration?
- 18) What changes would you like to see in your relationship with the Community Reps?
Probes: What changes could you make to improve your work with them?
- 19) Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't discussed?

Satisfaction Survey

1. Were you satisfied with the CWOP Community Representative who staffed your conference?
(please circle one)

Very Satisfied Satisfied Partially Satisfied Not at all Satisfied

Please explain:

2. In what way(s) did the Community Representative assist or support you during your conference?
