

The Experiences and Perceptions of Peer-Parents in the Child Welfare Workforce

by

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ABSTRACT

Peer-parenting in child welfare is a developing field with a growing repository of research that demonstrates a positive effect on child welfare case outcomes such as rates of reunification and parent engagement. Peer-parenting also benefits the peer-parents, who apply their lived child welfare experience to their service to clients, by providing fulfilling and satisfying work opportunities. However, there is a lack of research focusing on workforce characteristics or workforce development for peer-parents. Qualitative interviews were conducted with professional peer-parents in the child welfare field to understand their perceptions and experiences being employed as a peer-parent. The findings demonstrate a deep commitment to their work as peer-parents, the important role that leadership and supervision plays, and valuable insight into what improvements can be made to the workforce.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research project to my grandfather, James Dewey, who passed away in August of 2022. In one of my last conversations in the days leading up to his passing, I spoke to him about completing my master's in social work, and he told me, "Make us proud". Sapó, as a rough and gruff man who gave so much of your time supporting incarcerated youth, I know you would be proud of this work.

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I also want to give thanks to God who has been a constant presence, comfort, and strength. He is my ultimate motivation to pursue what is just and do right by people, and the grace I need when I fail.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Peer Support Work Background

Peer support work is when individuals provide support to those who share an experience (Price et al., 2022). A well-known model that has applied this in an informal manner is Alcoholics Anonymous which was established in 1937 (du Plessis, 2019). Alcoholics Anonymous is one of the earliest examples of utilizing peers to provide guidance and support to reach a certain outcome. Throughout the years since its inception, the peer-to-peer model has been used informally, formally, and professionally in a variety of areas such as mental health, acute physical health, social well-being, substance use addiction recovery, and child-welfare (Bohannan et al., 2016, Chapman et al., 2019, Price et al., 2022 & Saeteurn et al., 2022). Peer-to-peer work can take many forms including educating, mentoring, and coaching. It has been broadly shown to be effective in providing social connection and improving well-being (Price et al., 2022). Peer parenting, where parents provide support to parents who are experiencing a shared situation directly involving their children, has most often been used in medical settings to provide support to parents whose children are experiencing an acute illness. Peer parenting has demonstrated effectiveness in a parent's functioning and is considered a positive experience for both the mentor and mentee (Bohannan et al., 2016).

Peer support workers can use their shared experience and lived experiences to provide support, guidance, and expertise in a specific situation, particularly difficult situations to navigate (Adams, 2020). Individuals providing peer support work are often altruistically motivated and have a desire to replicate support they received or fill a need

where they did not receive support (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022). Peer support workers who operate in formal roles, such as professionals or volunteers for a specific social service sector, often benefit from the relationship by gaining new skills and job experience (Feldman, 1994).

Commonly found attributes of peer workers across research studies include providing hope and encouragement to their clients by being an example of having overcome the shared experience (Tseris, 2019). Often, clients also feel an increased trust and satisfaction towards their peer support worker compared to other professionals which can help empower clients to competently navigate their situations (Bohannon et al., 2016). Since the relationship is built on a foundation of shared experience, peer support work also provides a non-hierarchical relationship between a professional or volunteer and a client which can increase empowerment and trust (Tseris, 2019). Peer workers are uniquely equipped to form rich relationships with their clients which can induce positive outcomes for all parties involved (Feldman, 1994; Huebner et al., 2018).

Peer support workers not only have a direct benefit on their clients, but they also help grow their respective profession. Peer workers provide an experiential knowledge and perspective that can act as a bridge between providers and clients (Tseris, 2019). They can also serve as an advocate for the client's needs in a direct setting and at a systemic level (Bakshi, 2021). Peer workers can understand service and program needs from a client's perspective and have valuable insight into what and how services should be delivered, and how programs should be structured to be most efficient and effective (Tseris, 2019).

Peer support work is an asset to many different types of work and can fill a unique void within social service organizations by providing clients with a partner that can more acutely understand their experience and offer support. Although it has been informally in place since 1937 (du Plessis, 2019), peer-parenting has been applied to child welfare organizations since the early 2000's and continues to expand in that area (Saeteurn et al., 2022).

Peer-Parenting in Child Welfare

Peer parenting in child welfare is a developing domain with little research. What research exists supports improved outcomes in child welfare cases (Saeteurn et al., 2022). Peer parents in child welfare are those who have successfully navigated their child welfare cases, most often referring to reunification. Similar to other peer support workers, peer parents in child welfare can provide encouragement and instill hope to parents who are currently involved in child welfare (Chambers et al., 2019; Cohen & Canan, 2006; Drabble et al., 2016). While relationships between child welfare workers and parents can often be tense, a peer parent relationship reduces the power dynamics and fosters trust, transparency, increased communication, and honesty (Summers et al., 2012). While it is possible that peer-parenting could lead to adverse impacts on child-welfare involved parents, such as the emotional effects of having both a strong and temporary connection between parents and peer-parents, the existing research does not appear to elucidate any negative effects. Peer parents can educate, and guide parents involved in the child welfare system on resources. More specifically, this could mean education around the child welfare court system, how to advocate for personal needs, and parenting practices. Ultimately, the peer parent's goal is to help a parent complete all the required aspects of

their child welfare case and reunify with their child (Chambers et al., 2019). A peer-parent's role often extends beyond direct interactions with the parent and includes being an advocate for the parent's needs within their own organization and other child welfare organizations, especially within state-run institutions. They also help reduce the stigma towards parents involved in child welfare by serving as an example of transformation (Berrick et al., 2011; Chambers et al., 2019; Drabble et al., 2016).

Peer-parents exist in child welfare to help achieve positive outcomes for parents and children. Case outcomes such as reunification and time to case closure are important measures of impact as they can have profound effects on children who are living in out-of-home care, and those who are at risk for violent crime, youth delinquency, substance use, obesity, and depression (Bohannon et al., 2016 & Enano et al., 2016). Parent engagement is considered one of the strongest predictors and influences on whether parents will reunify with their children and successfully close their child welfare case (Berrick et al., 2011; Drabble et al., 2016; Summers et al., 2012).

Parents involved in child welfare are usually involuntary participants who may feel isolated from their child welfare caseworker and distrust them. The strained relationship between child welfare workers and parents and the lack of other social supports for parents can impact case outcomes (Bohannon et al., 2016; Summers et al., 2012). Peer-parenting has been shown to improve parent's attitudes, engagement, self-efficacy, knowledge of child welfare-systems, parenting skills, and trust in child welfare workers (Bohannon et al., 2016; Chambers et al., 2019; Summers et al., 2012). It has also been effective in connecting parents with social resources and increasing their social capital, which can help decrease recidivism in child welfare (Chambers et al., 2019).

Studies have demonstrated that peer-parents can have a direct positive impact on case outcomes. Participation in peer-parenting programs has shown to increase the likelihood of reunification by two to five times (Berrick et al., 2011; Bohannon et al., 2016; Chambers et al., 2019; & Enano et al., 2016). Further, in some studies, black parents who engaged with programs had an increased rate of reunification, which means peer-parenting could be a model that helps reduce overrepresentation of black families in the child welfare system (Saeteurn et al., 2022). Peer-parents can also help reduce re-entry into the child welfare system, increase compliance with case plans, and increase court attendance by parents (Bohannon et al., 2016; Saeteurn et al., 2022). In some studies of case outcomes, parents also expressed positive feelings towards their peer-parent in comparison with their child welfare case worker (Berrick et al., 2011).

The benefits that peer-parenting bring to child welfare are clear, but peer-parenting is also beneficial for the peer-parents. Peer parents can develop new professional skills and gain valuable professional experience (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022). Peer-parents also find satisfaction from helping others and connecting with parents. They are often motivated to provide either the help they received when they were at their lowest, or the help they did not receive. Sometimes they feel as though their work is ordained by a higher power (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022). In addition to gaining professional knowledge, peer-parents learn from their peers in a mutually beneficial relationship (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022).

The opportunities to grow the field of peer-parenting are endless. Although it is a relatively new field without much research, the professionalization of peer-parenting should be better understood. The demonstrated effectiveness in child welfare systems and

the benefit demonstrated to both parents and peer-parents compels a deeper look at how peer-parents are treated within the workplace setting. In a literature review of peer-parenting programs, a lack of research was found regarding this topic, including any research on compensation or supervision (Saeteurn et al., 2022). Some potential challenges of being employed as a peer-parent include relapse for those in recovery from substance use, struggles maintaining boundaries, and barriers with personal history and hiring (Huebner et al., 2018). Due to the lack of research specifically involving peer-parents in child welfare, and the limited research on the professionalization of other peer support models, research on paraprofessionals is used to help develop background knowledge.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Paraprofessionals are a type of professional that has minimal education without any professional or specialized training in their field. They are supervised by a social service professional (Wallach & Mueller, 2006). Paraprofessionals are similar to peer support workers and peer-parents in that they are less technically qualified in workforce setting. Paraprofessionals are a more developed field than peer professionals and research regarding the professionalization of paraprofessionals can lend additional insight into workforce development for peer-parenting.

Benefits of Peer and Paraprofessional Employment

Common positive attributes of working in the peer and paraprofessional field include deep personal satisfaction and growth, and professional growth. Peer workers often have a deep personal connection and trust with their clients because of their shared experiences in difficult circumstances (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022). Peers are also fulfilled by being able to turn their adverse experiences into something positive, and their work can even increase their commitment to their recovery, if they struggle with any substance use disorder (du Plessis, 2019; Huebner et al., 2018; Tseris, 2019). In addition to feeling empowered themselves, paraprofessionals and peer workers also benefit from seeing their clients empowered and taking part in their transformation (du Plessis, 2019; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022). These workers also learn from their clients and through their mastery of soft skills including communication, resilience, and purpose (du Plessis, 2019).

Professional growth for paraprofessionals and peer workers also includes hard skills such as obtaining additional credentials or certifications, writing, public speaking, and computer skills (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022). Sometimes paraprofessional and peer positions can be a point of entry into the workforce or a catalyst for future opportunities. For one specific peer-parenting program, peer-parents had access to free college tuition, so in some instances, it could even provide educational opportunities (Huebner et al., 2018).

Challenges of Peer and Paraprofessional Employment

Along with the benefits also come unique challenges to those employed in the peer and paraprofessional workforce. In a personal capacity, workers may experience a resurgence of their own trauma, or experience a heavy emotional toll that leads to burn out (Chappell Deckert & Statz-Hill, 2016; du Plessis, 2019). Within the workplace, there could be stigma, discrimination, and they may be seen as less credible by their coworkers, which can increase personal discomfort and even prevent workers from speaking up and providing input. Particularly for peer support workers who are hired based on their lived experience which often comes with a complicated past, it may be difficult to overcome workplace perceptions and feel comfortable in their work environment. Paraprofessionals and peer workers often feel less valued in their place of work which could discourage them from continuing (Chapman et al., 2019; du Plessis, 2019; Huebner et al., 2018; Tseris, 2019). Additionally, often peer workers are expected to challenge programmatic or organizational structures that may conflict with completing their regular job duties or present a conflict of interest (Tseris, 2019). Paraprofessionals and peer workers may also struggle with the organizational components of the job, such

as following procedures and protocols, and they may require additional support and training (Wallach & Mueller, 2006).

The personal challenges can be exasperated by the structural challenges such as pay and benefits. Often, workers in these fields receive low pay, lack benefits and paid time off, and have high caseloads (Adams, 2020; Chapman et al., 2019; Feldman, 1994). Paraprofessionals and peer workers lack opportunities for upward mobility within their organizations and may be less valued than their more technically trained counterparts (Tseris, 2019; Wallach & Mueller, 2006). One of the most common themes in the research was the lack of role clarity for these professionals in their workplace which can lead to a lack of boundaries and burnout. Role clarity should be provided through supervision and leadership (Chappell Deckert & Statz-Hill, 2016). In a specific article looking at peer-parents' perceptions of their role, supervision that was clear and supportive, was emphasized as being a key aspect of their ability to work well (Berrick et al., 2010).

Strategies for Strengthening the Peer-Parent Workforce

The same article discussed other specific elements that could increase peer-parent satisfaction with their work which included having clear roles and expectations of their position, reliance on fellow peer-parents for problem solving and support, a positive work environment, and the need for peer-parents to not be bitter about their own child welfare experience (Berrick et al., 2010). Other elements that influence job satisfaction are perceived organizational support, workplace integration, and psychological empowerment (Chappell Deckert & Statz-Hill, 2016). Further research can illuminate other means to improve the peer-parenting workforce. For example, focus groups have

been shown to benefit peer workers who could have additional support and a safe space to process the demands of daily work (Tseris, 2019). Some research on paraprofessionals has advocated for a more formalized standard of care through licensure, which could provide a set standard, expectations, and liability insurance (Bass, 1976). Formal licensure could increase credibility and respect for peer work, but it may also interfere with the flexibility that is unique to peer-parenting.

The two most salient contributions to improving the peer-parenting workforce center around education and training, including career opportunities, and equitable pay. On-site trainings can supplement expertise lacking from lived experience and can increase a peer-parent's effectiveness in their position. Educational opportunities, such as providing academic scholarships, can also mutually benefit a peer-parent organization and the peer-parent by enhancing social service skills and providing increased opportunity for professional growth. It could also help increase the perceived value of the peer workforce for peripheral child welfare organizations. Career ladder programs could also be used to help grow individuals and the program by recognizing high-performing and motivated employees (Bayer, 1994).

If peer-parents echo the trends of peer support workers and paraprofessionals, the pay they receive is very low, potentially minimum wage. Pay should reflect the value of the work and position, but active steps should be taken to understand what ethical pay constitutes. Greer et al. (2019) eloquently states the following, "...equitable pay can be understood as compensation for people's time that fairly values their knowledge, efforts, and time without discriminating based on a person's social identity." Standards of pay and other benefits, such as health insurance and paid time off, can be established by

reviewing workforces with similar job duties and by creating committees of key stakeholders involved in child welfare who can reach a consensus. The challenge is to balance the financial bandwidth of these types of organizations while ensuring that peer-parents are compensated fairly (Greer et al., 2019).

Peer support work, specifically peer-parenting in child welfare, is effective and important. It is vital that those employed in these positions are supported, so the workforce can continue to thrive and promote successful outcomes for parents and children involved in child welfare. While there is a growing repository of research related to peer-parenting models in child welfare, there is a lack of research related specifically to developing the workforce. The following qualitative study will add to the literature on peer-parenting in child welfare with special attention to workforce development with the hope that it can provide a basis for understanding how to best support those who are employed as peer-parents and their organizations. Strengthening the workforce of peer-parenting could help to increase the likelihood of positive case outcomes for children and parents by creating a sustainable work environment where peer-parents can best support their clients.

The theoretical framework for the research will use the Empowerment Model which emphasizes increasing an individual's power so they can affect change on the environment around them, including their own self-perceptions (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022). Cohen and Canan (2006) define empowerment as, "...thought to increase people's ability to make decisions for themselves, gain control over common life domains (e.g., shelter, income, health care), and provide an opportunity to participate in the larger processes of directing how services are delivered (Segal et al.)." Applied to peer-parents

in child welfare, they should feel empowered through their work, both through their own sense of accomplishment and satisfaction and external confirmation of the value they add to the workforce, so that they can continue to provide the best services to their clients and be an advocate for change within the child welfare system.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Objectives

The purpose of this current study is to understand how peer-parents in the child welfare sector in the southwest region of the United States perceive their employment. The research question is: what are the experiences and perceptions of peer-parents in the Southwest on being part of the child welfare workforce? Peer-parenting programs are a growing field in the Southwest with a developing repertoire of research but none which focuses exclusively on professionalization (Saeteurn et al., 2022 & Summers et al., 2012). The focus in this study will be on peer-parent employees who are paid for their work and work for an agency supporting child welfare-involved families. For the purpose of this study, a peer-parent is defined as an individual who has personal experience with a child welfare case, whether an open case or investigation of alleged abuse, and currently is a paid employee in the child welfare workforce.

Search Terms

To complete the background and literature review, the database SOC Index with full text was used. The search terms used for literature on the workforce of peers included the following: *peer parent OR parent ally OR parent allies OR parent mentor OR child welfare lived experience OR recovery coach OR parent support specialist* in conjunction with the following: *workforce OR work OR job OR employment OR compensation OR work field OR career OR professional OR profession OR education OR certification OR training*. The search terms were for literature on the workforce of paraprofessionals included the following: *promotore OR promoters OR promotor OR lay worker OR*

layworker OR paraprofessional in conjunction with the following: *workforce OR work OR job OR employment OR compensation OR work field OR career OR professional OR profession OR education OR certification OR training*.

Research Design

A cross-sectional qualitative study was conducted where qualitative interviews took place with six peer-parents located in the southwest region of the United States. Key stakeholders of peer-parenting programs provided contact information for potentially interested participants. Participants were recruited via email using a recruitment script approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Arizona State University (ASU). The research was supervised by a tenured faculty member at ASU and conducted by a master's in social work (MSW) student.

The six participants consisted of five females and one male. The participants were asked about the length of time of their employment as a peer-parent which ranged from one year to a little over 20 years. Although race and ethnicity were not asked, two participants identified as black, and one participant identified as Native American. Two of the participants were in a supervisory role.

The interview schedule was developed by the student researcher based on existing literature and was reviewed and approved by the thesis committee consisting of three social work professors at ASU. The interview schedule can be reviewed in the Appendix. The initial aim of the study was to conduct 10-12 interviews with peer-parents so that a saturation of content could be obtained (Guest et al., 2020). Due to lack of available participants and lack of resources for additional recruitment, six interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 30 – 60

minutes. The interviews were video and audio recorded then transcribed through Zoom. The transcriptions were reviewed and modified prior to coding.

Participants were read an informed consent statement prior to the interview in accordance with the IRB protocol. All identifying information, including name and place of work, was redacted prior to coding. To maintain confidentiality, due to the small pool of participants, place of work, demographic information, identifying quotes, and names are excluded from the results. Participants were mailed \$25 gift cards to Walmart as compensation for their time.

Thematic analysis open coding via NVivo software was used to analyze the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To increase validity, two coders completed the initial open coding. The second coder completed open coding which consisted of assessing each line of the interview transcripts and assigning a respective code. The two coders met to review the codes and reached a consensus. The primary coder completed the same process of line-by-line open coding, and then the initial codes were synthesized into themes by the primary coder. The final themes were shared with the second coder who provided agreement. Member checking was also used where two participants of the study were selected to provide feedback on the themes developed. The two participants were emailed the initial results section of the study. Both confirmed receipt of the results, but only one provided feedback which included consensus with the themes and clarification about a specific term, which was included in the results.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The qualitative interviews provided a broad array of insight into the peer-parents' perceptions of their workforce. One of the most salient aspects was the overwhelmingly positive perception of their work. However, it was also clear that challenges and barriers existed and need to be addressed throughout the workforce. The experiences of peer-parents employed in child welfare were condensed into the following six themes: the perceived role of peer-parents; peer-parenting is transformative; peer-parents are deeply committed to their work; leadership has a profound role in the peer-parenting workforce; peer-parents find great value in further education and training; and improvements in the workforce are needed. Each of the major themes are discussed below.

Perceived Role of Peer-Parents

Peer-parents perceive their role to be highly involved and requiring a depth of investment not usually required by many entry-level positions. A peer-parent's role with their clients is predominantly applying their lived and shared experience to provide understanding, hope, empathy, active listening, and education to the parent they walk alongside. For example, one participant explains the uniqueness to lived experience:

I think that we can meet them right where they're at. We know. I think that it minimizes the guilt and shame that a parent might have, knowing that they're talking to someone with lived experience versus, you know, not. I don't know how else - versus not because most times I know when I was going through it - it was hard for me to - it was hard for me to connect or really trust people, because I always thought 'you have no idea what my life is like. You don't even know what,

you know, what I'm dealing with, or how I feel, or what I'm going through', and to know that we can offer that kind of understanding and compassion.

Another participant stated the following: "I think that's the - the main thing is just the lived experience, because lived experience kind of translates to a lot of different things. Like I said with the - with knowing what somebody's going through..." While another had the following remarks: "...and helping that family hopefully feel heard and understood when they probably aren't really being heard or understood." And again, a participant shared the following when describing the role of a peer-parent: "...directly supporting parents navigating DCS, help - to help them understand the language, the process, get resources, you know, connect them to resources and give them hope."

Each peer-parent is assigned a caseload of parents who have open child welfare cases, and each peer-parent has their own personal experience with child welfare involvement. Peer-parents can circumvent the usual power dynamics that exist between child welfare workers and parents, since they've been in the same position as their client. For example:

I would say, like, you know, definitely the purpose of it is just because you're able to share, like, this, like, sacred circle. You know what I mean? Like the circle of trust with someone. There's a - there's a lot of stereotypes like, you know, for people in the field, that there's a lot of younger people. People who come from different backgrounds, who try to come into underprivileged people, or, you know, all these other people who've been there and tell them how they should do it. And, you know, a lot of people struggle with it that. You know, that stereotype is true. I can say with my own experience, and working in the field, I do see it a

lot. And so, there's just something that comes with, like - when I'm, like, teaching something like protective factors or like Trust-Based Relational Intervention, Triple P, like, if I'm talking about those things with the family, I'm actually able to tell that family like, 'hey, look! This is the shitty things I did. This is how I struggled. And this is how this material like helped me. This is how it changed me.' I just feel like there's another layer that comes with it when I can actually say, like, I was there in the muck, too, and this is the information that was transformational. You know, a lot of people, like, hear that, and they just, like - they grab onto it, and they hold it.

A key part of their role is providing hope since they have successfully navigated their child welfare case as exemplified by the following sentiment:

So, there's a lot of stuff the job entails. Mainly, it's - it's the connection, to be honest, because if they don't trust you, or anything like that. Or - or just knowing that there's hope, you know, knowing that there's someone like that that would exactly do like that: I had this long process, and - and now they have a home - maybe not a home - but, you know, got an apartment, you got your kids, you're somewhere you didn't think you'd be.

The peer-parent also has a responsibility to be direct and honest with a client even when it means speaking a hard truth; provide a presence even in moments of despair; confront personal and external bias; remain self-aware and emotionally controlled about their own trauma; be the voice of parents even when it stands in opposition to other constituents; and to not work harder than their clients but educate them about a

constructive way forward. The following is an example of the important of interrupting bias:

...being able to interrupt bias, right. You know, you're standing in the hallway, and your coworkers are talking about a family in a negative way. Am I able to say, 'hey, you know, this parent's a parent, and they're, you know, they're struggling. That this isn't necessarily appropriate. Being able to – being able to go to your supervisor, and being able to say, "hey, I'm a little uncomfortable about this."

Another participant stated the following regarding emotional health: "but you have to be in a good place yourself. You can't be in the place where you're still, like, so hurt, so broken that you can't give to somebody else." One participant expressed the need for support on a specific level: "a really hard one is being able to stand your ground next to someone to the end while their ship is sinking. To hold that space with them when they're in despair and there's nothing left to say or do." Another participant shares the importance of direct communication:

...and when people are, you know, living in their mode, their crisis, their survival mode every day, they don't want to hear flowery language. Sometimes they just need to hear that they're being an asshole, and they're making themselves look bad. And it's okay to tell them that.

Similarly, when asked about what is essential within their place of work, one participant said: "Being transparent as - as much benefit the person." When speaking to the difficulty of advocating for a parent, one participant stated the following:

...supporting this parent asking for what they want, but it's possibly against the agency that's providing the service, that can become an issue. And then all of a sudden, the peer-parent is seen as the enemy, when the reality is the peer-parent is supporting the parent to have their voice.

Some of the key characteristics of peer-parents that were described were empathetic, patient, self-aware, flexible, encouraging, dedicated, organized, and having a good work ethic. Peer-parents also view themselves as role models who have knowledge of child welfare system. One participant explains the need for organization: "it's better if you're organized, because they give you - they - they try - because sometimes you have a case load of a lot of people..." While another participant speaks to a good work ethic: "just like any job, show up ready to do the work. Have a good work ethic." The following excerpt addresses the dedication and heart needed in the work:

If you got a heart for wanting to help people, or just, you know, not even necessarily a heart for it – if this is your passion, if you've been there, done that, and you know that you're - you're gonna make a difference that day, well, we can go and outreach. Our outreach is incredibly different.

When asked about the roles of peer-parents, another participant spoke of role modeling:

We also want to be role modeling, you know, good behaviors for the family. So, when I need a resource, this is the steps that I follow, this is where I can go, when I - You know, we'll do three-way phone calls with people. Many people don't have the time, ability. It's not in their scope. They just don't have time. But you know, we'll sit there and do three-way phone calls with families. We'll even go

look at apartments with them, you know, and we'll ask questions to the people, and, you know, just hopefully be teaching them how to do the skill.

They seek to persistently reach out and understand their clients' needs by being a consistent and understanding presence to meeting their basic needs through food boxes as iterated the following statements: "Directly supporting parents navigating DCS, help - to help them understand the language, the process, get resources, you know, connect them to resources and give them hope."

If I'm having a hard time getting a hold of someone, or they don't look like they want to engage, I try to meet a basic need first, which is, you know, like shelter, food. What we - what I try to do is usually offer, like, 'hey, you need a food box? You - are you hungry?'

Salient terms that were used by multiple participants were non-adversarial advocacy and using lived experience as a superpower. Non-adversarial advocacy was specifically mentioned as a tool by half of the participants. It was explained by a participant as a method of advocating for oneself while avoiding confrontational language, which peer-parents teach and model to their clients. [Clarification about non-adversarial advocacy was provided during the process of member checking. The above explanation was provided during that process]. Within non-adversarial advocacy, a peer-parent must also commit to listening to understand what a parent means and needs, and then being an advocate and translator for that parent to other professionals and systems. Using lived experience as a superpower is an empowering phrase that describes how a peer-parent finds strength from the hard circumstances they have overcome and the profound value in their experiences. A participant explained, "...not being afraid to, like,

use your lived experience. I think that's, like, our superpower. Going back into our own story and kind of figuring out, like, what our strengths were..." While another participant stated, "having a superpower, we can sometimes reach people who have an aversion or distrust of people in more professionalized roles."

Peer-parents also play a role within their place of work and the larger workforce in child welfare. In their immediate workplace, peer-parents can provide support to their non-peer-parent coworkers by providing them a perspective to increase their understanding of their clients. Peer-parents can also help coworkers strategize about how to build trust and rapport with their clients.

Sometimes parents, I think, have - I mean - maybe it's fear - or just don't have the skills to just - probably fear, and guilt and shame - just to talk openly, and so to be able to work with people that can come and ask questions and follow up with - with us as lived experience, and then go back and address their parent with a better, you know, with a - a different scope or a different lens, I think, helps the overall process.

A participant expressed the collaborative environment where lived experience can be shared with coworkers:

So, I have a boss, actually, who has been with DCS, our - our- one of our head bosses, who - and she always will come to us and ask questions, and - and most of them do now, the other people in the office that - that don't necessarily have lived experience, but to be able to give them feedback and suggestions, and maybe a better understanding of what a parent might need, feel, or is going through to help

them better relate and build rapport with them - with the parent. So, just a different level of understanding.

The collaboration between the two entities goes both ways since non-peer-parent coworkers can provide insight into the child welfare systems that a peer-parent might not know, as stated below:

And the same for us, like, I also feel comfortable going to these same people and asking all the official questions and the technical things that I may not know, because I'm literally functioning off of just my lived experience. And so I - I - the particular people that I work with, I can - I can go and ask those things which also helps me as a peer parent supporter that - to be able to get the knowledge, even though I can say, 'well, yeah, I've been there, and I've done this and that', I can go ask the questions on something that's going on within the specific system

Peer-parents can also serve as a catalyst for communication between program departments that can be siloed. For example:

...we try to cross train, you know. Working in behavioral help, I think it's true for any organization, like, you'll have each department working in silos sometimes.

So, I - our organization is still a little bit like that. But I try to cross train my team as much as we can. I try to collaborate with the other teams...

Throughout the greater child welfare workforce, peer-parents can act as a "bridge" and "buffer" between parents and the other professionals and systems they encounter. For example, one participant described: "We can also sometimes help act as a buffer between the parent and others and assist with communication or knowledge

barriers.” Similarly, peer-parents can help “translate” a client’s intention to other entities as described below:

You know that parent ally can maybe like act as a translator sometimes, like, if a family just has a massive case of word vomit, you know, hopefully, we can help, like, redirect things to tell people, ‘I think what they're trying to say is this.’ ‘You know, when - when we've talked, you know, this is what's been told to me, and you know we just want to know, is this possible?’ You know, we can just kind of hopefully help aid in the communication.

Peer-parents can also provide hope to other professionals as much as they do to their own clients by helping relieve some of the stress of finding resources and support for clients.

Where we fit in the picture is to be another person, with shared experience, who can stand alongside the parent so that everybody has hope. When parents are successful, it not only nourishes their spirit but also those of the people who work as professionals in the system.

Peer-Parenting is Transformative

Peer-parenting transforms the lives of clients, the peer-parents themselves, and even the systems in which they work. When describing their job as a peer-parent and the impact it has had on them, it was repeated time and again how life changing the experience has been. For some, it was life changing in that they never saw themselves in this kind of position but now they can’t see themselves doing anything else. A participant stated, “I never saw myself doing anything like it, but now I just can't really see myself doing anything else.” For others, the amount of support they received from coworkers and leadership empowered them to do the work. Others described the experience as a

second chance in life, keeping them sober in their addiction recovery and improving their relationships with family. A participant explains their transformation, “you know, me doing this has been able to help address my life in so many different areas. You know, having a career that's fulfilling, being able to work up, and, you know, be living in a home.” For some, it was the transformation of painful experiences into something useful and rewarding:

So, I think that the benefits are that I'm able to take that experience that I never wanted, because I could have skipped it, thank you very much. It was hard, but I'm able to take that and benefit other folks.

The term “life changing” was used several times to describe being employed as a peer-parent. A few participants described the amount of professional and personal growth they have had by being given this opportunity, such as being empowered to return to school and receiving training that has increased their knowledge and understanding of parenting. A participant provides details of how it changed their life in the following statement:

My God, it's completely changed my life, like, completely changed my life in so many, many positive ways. First of all, in the beginning, I was learning as much in the process as I was giving. Really! Like, I would be able to learn things and take them home to my own family. Whether that was - I do a lot of training and education now, so I've been lucky enough to get certified in parenting - things like that. So, I was able to, like, start to learn new skills and bring those home to my own family, but at the same time utilize them with parents I was supporting. I have been able to just really learn and grow simultaneously, understanding more

about, say, the child and family team, process, team decision making process, really understanding more about child welfare - how that works in the court system and navigating it. So, all of those things help not only my professional behavior, but my, you know, my - my personal life, which was super awesome.

Even when describing future employees, there was language around taking someone from extremely hard circumstances and giving them opportunity: “You know, I really do feel sometimes like we're grabbing people and just pulling them up from the bowels of the city. And hopefully, you know, putting them somewhere where they can stand a little bit higher.”

It was also clear that the peer-parents saw transformation within their clients, anecdotally describing an increased rate of reunification and successful case outcomes. Celebrating the accomplishments and success of their clients was described as an important aspect within the work. Many state that they continue the work because they believe they can influence change, and they have seen the evidence. For example:

The work we do is very, very important, and I think for the first time ever I see that - that is really climbing; that, you know, the child welfare world is starting to really understand that - that peer to peer parent support is very important; that it's changing lives and making differences; that we see outcomes; we see increases in parents reunifying with their children quicker; we - we see more severance trials changing back to reunification.

Peer-Parents are Deeply Committed to Their Work

The fulfillment and satisfaction peer-parents expressed about their job was talked about in emphatic terms and discussed by nearly all participants. Despite many

discussing the challenging aspects of the work, it was usually followed with reiterating their commitment to the work. For example, while discussing potential deterrents from continuing the work, one participant expressed:

I don't know that that's a big one, like, and I hate to make it about money, because my job is – has, like, satisfied me in ways like I've never been before. So, it's like I - that's why I'm still here, and I'm, like, this is - this is the first job that I jumped into, and I naturally understood. It was really weird. So, I was like, this is - it's - it's not even, like, I have to try, you know, even though I do, like, I don't know if that makes sense. But, like, you have to work at it, but, like, it just - it flows so naturally.

Many expressed their satisfaction and love for the job despite transparency about some of the challenges. For instance, when asked what could deter them continuing work as a peer-parent and the challenges of being a peer-parent, the following were described: emotionally draining work, triggering of personal trauma, engaging clients with little motivation to change, no benefits such as vacation pay or health insurance, being paid minimum wage, lack of role clarity, burnout, being delegitimized by other professionals in the profession, managing undesired client outcomes, and stigma from personal experience. Others simply described it as hard work that is not for everyone. Despite it being hard work with a low pay rate and no benefits, the level of commitment, satisfaction, and love for the job stands in sharp contrast. One participant expressed the following challenges:

Yeah, of course, disadvantages can just be, like, well, I guess that - you know, there's times when it feels like – again, you can't help everybody. There's a

disappointment, I guess. if I want to get into a financial aspect, I - I - that's why I want to go back to school. You know, I - I want a career in this, and I want to excel in what I'm doing. I like where I'm at right now with this job. I - I don't know. I guess the disadvantage would be you can't help everybody like you want to help everybody...

The same participant said this when asked about what could possibly deter them from continuing to work as a peer-parent:

Myself. I think the only thing that could happen – I - I know that I want - I need to stay in this job that I have. It's gonna keep me grounded. It's going to keep my focus where I want it to be for my end result.

Similarly, another participant expressed their challenges with the work:

The pay rate is really harsh. The disadvantages, I think...As it's, like, new and upcoming, we're still trying to, like, make a name for our position. I see a lot - plenty of greatness, you know. When people interact with us, like, we're acknowledged places. So, I think, maybe just, like, we're setting the - the ground for peer-parent support stuff.

However, the same participant also expressed their deep appreciation for their work:

My gosh! How have I been impacted? You're gonna make me cry with that one. I've just got to meet a lot of different parents in a lot of different situations, and it really opened my eyes to, like, there's so many people that have it worse, you know. And just meeting - being able to meet somebody where they are at, because somebody met me where I was at is just - it's - it's life changing, you know.

The participants not only expressed their outright commitment to the job, but they also described their level of investment in their clients and to the workforce. Many described the importance of persistently reaching out to their clients. For example, “you know, I always have to say, ‘what is my role?’ And sometimes my role is to keep reaching out to that person, so that even if they don't want to talk to me...” Being a presence even in moments of despair and frustration, allowing space to listen and truly understand their clients’ needs, and a desire to learn from each person and their story were other important aspects. A participant explains being present during difficult circumstances:

Some of them are at the end of their case, and they just need to hope. My boss calls it: sometimes you gotta sink down with the ship with them...but what she means is sometimes you - you're all that hope that parent has at that time.

Many could not contain their passion when speaking on making the systems better for parents involved in child welfare and a desire to advocate for needed change:

I'm just super passionate about making the systems work for families, making child welfare work for families, being able to have DCS as a resource, not as someone that you fear, you know. And so I - I feel like that's kind of what I want to - where I'm going with it is pol- maybe policies and procedures and the function of the - of the models that they're - that are designed for the child welfare system.

Those in supervisory roles expressed their desire and joy in supporting their employees and making themselves available whenever needed. Some were motivated to become peer-parents because they wanted to return the help they received, or in contrast,

wanted to be the help they did not receive. The reiteration of a motivation to help others with a clear mind and full heart speaks even further to the deep commitment to their work in the face of adversity.

Leadership has a Profound Role in the Peer-Parenting Workforce

Supervision was discussed frequently across many different domains such as how peer-parents develop skills, role clarity, support, and experience. Every participant discussed how supervision was essential to being able to navigate their daily work. The following is one participant's statement about supervision:

Essential aspects of supervision and supervisors included having a supervisor who was experienced and knowledgeable about peer-parenting; a supervisor being accessible to openly discuss aspects of the peer parent's caseload; frequent communication; support and understanding offered regarding personal and client struggles; and respect for supervisor knowledge balanced with personal knowledge.

Another participant iterated, "I found that, you know, supervision is so important. Having a supervisor that really understands peer-parent support." While another participant addressed the role and expertise of supervisors:

You might not always get along with what your supervisor wants you to do, but your supervisor's there because they have that - those years of experience, and they - they've seen a lot of cases that if it's not the same thing, it's a similar case. So, just trust your supervisors and trust yourself.

Team based supervision and collaboration were also talked about positively as many peer-parents found it useful to be able to seek advice from their direct supervisors and their fellow peer-parent workers:

We spend a lot of time staffing and picking brains, and, you know, what's worked for you, what - what's better over here. I think that's, like, a huge piece of what we do: collaborating. And if we don't know the answer, there's a million and one people at [the organization] that you can go to that are, like, specifically - it's like they're - that's their superpower.

Support and availability of upper management was also described as being a highly valued attribute of the work and in some cases enabled support to trickle down.

For example:

And so, I find at this level, where, you know, I'm - I'm more in management than having her to be able to provide that support for me has been really great in terms of helping me to grow my skills, and then also to provide support for parent allies and parent ally supervisors.

The need for clear and directive communication from leadership was also considered an important aspect of enabling a peer-parent to know what scope of work their position contains and not going outside of that. A participant shared, "I feel like for me to perform my best, like, I need all the leadership from, like, the top up to just have clear expectations of what everyone should be doing."

Beyond direct supervision, leadership throughout the field of peer-parenting and child welfare was discussed as important. Specifically, the need for leaders in the field to advocate for the role of peer-parents was deemed to be essential to helping with

workforce growth and be legitimacy. To further grow the peer-parenting workforce, the need for a “champion” within leadership was also addressed. A key member of leadership who sees the value of the work peer-parents provides and communicates that to other professionals. As described by a participant: “We've been really needing to find like a champion here in Arizona who could help make it work that people can get paid for and not have to start closing all the doors.”

Peer-Parents Find Great Value in Further Education and Training

When discussing benefits of being a peer-parent, impacts peer-parenting has had on individuals, and career goals, every participant mentioned the importance of education and training. Many of the participants attended a peer-parenting educational program which was described as directly applicable and helpful to their daily work, empowering, and prompted a desire for further learning.

But now to be learning, like I said earlier in our conversation, the history of where these laws came from, how the systems came in place, how they've changed throughout time, why they've changed, where you can go, legislation, all the things. So, now I already feel like I know I want to do the second year, because I wasn't going to, I was just, like, going to do what they gave me, right. But now I think it's - it's amazing to have that knowledge base paired with lived experience 'cause it may just - the more that I get into the schooling, the more I feel like, okay, lived experience is going to take over the world. But really, I love the education piece coupled with the lived experience, and so, I definitely will continue to pursue school.

On-site and off-site trainings were frequently discussed both in their variety and in their usefulness. Peer-parents found ongoing trainings helpful in their work with child welfare involved parents, and in their personal lives. One participant stated simply, "...because I do like the trainings that they put me through. I got a lot of trainings that they - they make us do." Another advocated for the importance of engaging frequently with trainings:

And I started off taking those types of trainings. and I, like, I would suggest to anyone that wants to do peer support to take, because there's so many free trainings. I would just always say, take as many as you can on anything that you feel like you would have needed when you were trying to navigate the DCS system. Trauma, you know, effects of drug use, parenting. So, just use your resources.

When specifically speaking about trainings attended through work, a participant stated, "It helps me to be a better [parent]." Continued training was also discussed as a means for increasing the impact on clients: "I think, like, continued training, what would help me have the greatest impact on my clients."

When discussing future career goals, all but one of the participants, who had previously obtained a bachelor's degree, reported they would like to continue their education with at least an associate degree if not higher. Many mentioned they would like to be social workers or counselors and credited the education they had already received in helping them come to that decision. The combination of lived experience with education was particularly emphasized in the following:

But now to be learning, like I said earlier in our conversation, the history of where these laws came from, how the systems came in place, how they've changed throughout time, why they've changed, where you can go, legislation, all the things. So, now I already feel like I know I want to do the second year, because I wasn't going to, I was just, like, going to do what they gave me, right. But now I think it's - it's amazing to have that knowledge base paired with lived experience cause it may just - the more that I get into the schooling, the more I feel like, okay, lived experience is going to take over the world. But really, I love the education piece coupled with the lived experience, and so, I definitely will continue to pursue school.

Improvement in the Workforce is Needed

Although there was frequent and emphatic positivity toward the peer-parenting workforce, the profession is still growing and in its early stages of development. The peer-parenting workforce is ready for many needed changes. Peer-parents would be better equipped to support their clients if peer-parenting programs were more widely known and referred to, as it is currently only by word of mouth by child welfare constituents:

So, now we really - our only contact point is by word of mouth. There's a handful of attorneys. We have a team-base - team-based program right now to where an attorney can assign a social worker and then a parent ally to support the parent...

Another participant explains where clients currently hear of the program and the need for increased outreach:

And I'm like, 'how did you find out about this class?' And he's like, 'DCS just told me to come here'. And I was like, 'oh, that's amazing', because, you know,

they didn't know about this last year. So - but yeah, marketing like this more.

Like, because we do our own outreach there, if there was a way to - to get, you know, more outreach.

Additionally, many populations have a high need for peer-parenting support such as BIPOC and rural communities and locations with frequent child welfare involvement.

If the peer-parenting workforce could increase to become more available to those communities and provide specialized resources such as affordable housing, financial assistance, and possessing a vehicle, peer-parents would be better equipped to meet the needs of their clients. One participant addresses the impact of disproportionality:

Just how certain communities are affected and not given, like, the right resources or the referrals that they - that they may need. So I'm - I'm - I'm hugely impacted by - by the - the removal rate of - of black families, brown fam - black and brown, Native Americans, as well. It's kind of - it's pretty sad.

Another speaks to the desire to create change for communities:

That's something I would want to change. Reaching minorities, reaching more minorities. Minorities have trouble reaching out sometimes. It's not culturally appropriate or you keep it in the family. So, just bringing that awareness to other communities to say, it's okay to ask for help, I think would really benefit every - like, this - just the community.

Additionally, a participant expresses their desire for increased resources for families:

Housing resources, food resources outside of what we have, because we have a lot at our fingertips. But a lot of things that we've run into very recently are rotted - rotted food boxes, you know...and hot food resources...So, you know, stuff like

that. Like in the moment, you know, some people might look at it as, like, you know, you're enabling people to not work, and this and that. But it's like, dude, these people at the end of the day need to eat with their kids. Like, let's just make it happen, you know. Like, so stuff like that. Like, cars for families that might be reunifying with their kids.

Funding is another prevalent struggle for peer-parenting programs. Many peer-parents discussed how funding for their program comes from grants which allows for a certain flexibility of who they can serve and what they can do, but state funding such as Medicaid could increase their capacity to provide a fair wage, benefits, and reach more people. However, at least one peer-parent had mixed feelings about whether Medicaid funding would be an asset or restrictive:

AHCCCS health plans could probably help change the tides for it to become more mainstream and available to the general population. However, there is a drawback to this because then we would have to diagnose and provide services and create support plans and all the things in the land that come with billing. We've been able to serve so many people and tell them 'yes' when they ask for help. If we went through AHCCCS, we would lose the flexibility that made our program so unique.

Regardless of where the funding is sourced, peer-parenting programs need the financial security to sustain their programs and increase their growth. The funding should also reflect the value of peer-parenting work. A participant shares their thoughts on compensation and future development:

But we're also completely grant-funded, because we're not doing work on the child welfare – or [rather] on the behavioral health side. So, we're not billable. So, that makes it harder, too, because we're only able to be compensated as much as our grants are. Now, I know in Washington, where there's a similar program, they actually have legislation that pays parent-allies and parent-ally programs. So, that makes it a little bit different, which is nice. And I know, you know, again, our – our - our leaders are working on that.

Distinct job roles were also emphasized as important to a thriving peer-parenting program. Having an established role within the larger child welfare area helps legitimize and grow peer-parenting. Within a peer-parenting program, clear expectations and job roles are also important so that peer-parents can stay grounded in the specific job duties they enact, and boundaries they can and should hold with clients:

So, I had my supervisor and the [organization] to kind of say, this is what the role looks like, and here's who you can ask questions. And there were different coaches that could help, but a lot of times you'd end up with a clinical supervisor, and they were really great, really smart, and really fun, but they had absolutely no idea what we were supposed to. And so – and - and then didn't understand, kind of, some of the connection, really helping to draw some of those boundaries without just doing it for boundaries sake, right, making things clear, making the role clear.

Increased relationships with state child welfare organizations would increase a peer-parent's effectiveness. Peer parents believe that child welfare organizations would benefit from having peer-parents actively involved throughout their work. Along with

increasing credibility within child welfare organizations, the profession would benefit from evidence-based research on its effectiveness. One participant explains how peer-parents could better support child welfare workers:

...a lot of a lot falls on the department [of child safety] and they're busy, they're overwhelmed, they're losing people, they're retraining their - you know - So, as parent-allies, I think we love - we thrive on being able to step in those type of situations, and being like, look, let us take something off your plate and let us, you know, help in this area. And so, I think that's kind of, like, some - the missing link in some cases, but - because we would love to be that help.

Peer-parenting is a unique field in that it employs individuals who may have non-traditional work backgrounds. Careful consideration should be taken during the hiring process to ensure that unnecessary barriers are placed on those who may have criminal backgrounds. Participants discussed the requirement to secure a finger-print clearance card and how this can require additional steps for someone with lived experience. Stigma is also common with lived experience, and past experiences can deprive individuals of certain opportunities.

A lot of us have felonies. A lot of us have to work really hard to get our fingerprint clearance cards. Things like that. Some of us can't get them. That makes it really difficult, because there's places that we can't work if we can't get those credentials, when, in fact, our live - life experience speaks for itself.

Overall, systems should be in place to support peer-parents with lived experience regardless of their past experiences if they are the right fit for a position.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The peer-parenting workforce can provide personal and systemic support to individuals involved in the child welfare field, whether as professionals or parents. Peer-parents demonstrate a deep connection to their work because of the profound transformation they have experienced in their own lives. The field is exemplary of turning adverse circumstances into positive outcomes. The Empowerment Model focuses on how internal and external confirmations of value can inspire an individual to affect change within their environment (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022). The peer-parent participants are an example of how this is true. They expressed fulfillment and satisfaction with their work and their workplace and expressed a desire to continue to create change in the field of peer-parenting in child welfare. It appeared they felt competent in their job role but also empowered by their coworkers, supervisors, and client outcomes. Many of them articulated specific passions and desires to create change within the system to better provide for their clients and strengthen peer-parenting work, which may reflect the support and growth they experience on a personal and inter-personal level through their work.

Similar to the existing research (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022), the peer-parent participants expressed altruistic motives towards their work and satisfaction with the relationships they formed with their clients. They emphasized the importance of connecting with their clients and celebrating their victories which demonstrates a vested interest in client success. Leadership and supervision were salient theme which was reflected in previous research on peer-parents, especially in connection with role clarity

(Berrick et al., 2010 & Chappell Deckert & Statz-Hill, 2016). The participants noted that quality supervision was an essential part of their success which builds further support of a consistent theme across peer-parenting research. Another common thread between existing research and this study was a trend towards low-pay and lack of benefits. Although there is little research specific to the pay and benefits offered to peer-parents in child welfare, the literature on paraprofessionals consistently addressed equitable pay as a challenge within the field (Adams, 2020; Chapman et al., 2019; Feldman, 1994).

Because peer-parents are highly motivated to serve their clients to the best of their ability and find deep meaning and purpose to their work, they are also willing to continue it under less than perfect circumstances. Despite frequent and transparent acknowledgement that many of peer parents receive minimum wage while supporting their families, lack of health insurance and paid time off, and acknowledgement of the potential for burnout, many still expressed that little would deter them from continuing to work as a peer-parent. Although this enthusiasm can serve as a positive example to social service providers that the work should be approached wholeheartedly, it can also lead to perpetuating inequitable pay and benefits (Greer et al., 2019). Organizations employing peer-parents should be mindful that leadership should continually advocate for increase of pay and benefits and be willing to push for change, since it might not otherwise be motivated by retention. Equitable pay is a human right. (Greer et al., 2019).

Other challenges addressed in the background information included paraprofessionals and peer support works facing stigma, discrimination, and discomfort in the workplace due to their non-traditional and publicly displayed personal histories (Chapman et al., 2019; du Plessis, 2019; Huebner et al., 2018; Tseris, 2019). Stigma and discrimination

were expressed by a few study participants, but it was in reference to outside organizations, such as the child welfare legal court, and was expressed to have improved in the past five years. In contrast, the narrative most emphasized was that the peer-parents felt supported by their leaders and by their non-peer coworkers. No concerns of discomfort or discrimination were expressed in the workplace, but instead a collaborative and family-like environment were described where the peer-parents felt they could exercise their lived experience as a “superpower”.

Further takeaways from the results of the study include an emphasis on education, training, and creating space for those with lived experience to share their insight on creating change within the child welfare system. Education and training equip peer-parents to provide their clients with high quality service and improves their personal lives. Peer-parents spoke clearly and specifically as to how the education and training they received has improved their work. When describing the trainings, specifically, it was usually specialized training directly applicable to their job duties, which may be why it was especially helpful. Many participants also participated in an educational cohort designed for peer-parents, and the impact included increased knowledge of child welfare systems and produced an increased desire in many peer-parents to pursue further education in social services. Training and education are benefits to peer workers and their organizations, and peer-parenting organizations should invest resources to provide their employees with the educational resources they need (Bayer, 1994).

Finally, although this did not come up in the background research, peer-parents have valuable insight into how to grow their profession and improve the overall child welfare workforce. The background information presented developing focus group and

committees centered around workforce development and peer support (Greer et al., 2019; Tseris, 2019), but the same model could be applied to provide a think-tank for peer-parents to contribute their knowledge to a broader audience. Peer-parenting and child welfare agencies should create space to hear input from peer-parents about systems changes and needed resources.

Limitations

The study's limitations include a small sample size and small sample pool. Due to the small sample, demographic information such as race, age, gender, and other helpful metrics could not be evaluated. The disproportionality of child welfare regarding BIPOC populations and the lack of engagement with fathers (Saeteurn et al., 2022), necessitates further research that compares perceptions and experiences of peer-parents from a variety of backgrounds. Selection bias may also have affected the sample, since those who most favorably view their organization or position may have been most inclined to participate.

Implications for Social Work

Further research on workforce development, including a research-based understanding of fair pay (Greer et al., 2019), and a review of peer-parenting programs across the nation to understand standards within the workforce would also serve to develop the profession. Developing a standard of what an equitable and effective workforce of peer-parents in child welfare should be a key factor in strengthening the model and ultimately increasing positive outcomes for child-welfare involved families.

Policy implications include advocating for procedures that circumvent the hiring processes that are difficult for individuals with child welfare and legal system involvement. Federal and state funding could be incorporated more readily into peer-

parenting programs, but policies should be adopted that allow for continued flexibility in peer-parent work and not restrict their outreach by prioritizing documentation and Medicaid billable items (Adams, 2020).

Many of the peer-parent participants discussed how their work uniquely situates them to provide a trusting and wholistic support to their clients, parents involved in child welfare, who often experience tension and mistrust with their child welfare caseworkers (Bohannon et al., 2016). It is worth considering a larger implication that peer-parenting should be more widely adopted and embedded into the child-welfare system. The lived experience of individuals is a powerful tool that can promote an environment of success for parents while circumventing the traditional power dynamics that exists between child welfare professionals and parents. It is a unique approach, and if applied on a greater scale, it could even serve to replace some of the traditional methods of addressing abuse and neglect between parents and children.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This study adds to the research regarding peer-parenting programs in child welfare. Peer-parenting programs are an emerging field that increases positive outcomes for child welfare-involved families, provides support for child welfare agencies, and provides fulfilling work experience for peer-parents (Berrick et al., 2010; Saeteurn et al., 2022). A minimal amount of research has addressed workforce development of peer-parents. This study serves to provide a base of information which other professionals can use to increase efficiency within peer-parenting programs and peer-parenting research. Peer-parents provided their insights into being employed as a peer-parent through qualitative in-depth interviews and demonstrated a deeply founded dedication to their work, a thirst for further growth and knowledge, and a passion for justice within the lives of child welfare involved families and child welfare agencies. Social work would do well to lend an ear to the voices of those most acutely affected by the child welfare system and peer parents are an excellent conduit to hear such voices.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL



EXEMPTION GRANTED

Judy Krysik
WATTS-SSW: Social Work, School of
602/496-0086
Judy.Krysik@asu.edu

Dear [Judy Krysik](#):

On 1/25/2023 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Understanding the experiences and perceptions of peer-parents in the Southwest on being in the child welfare workforce
Investigator:	Judy Krysik
IRB ID:	STUDY00017351
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peer Parenting MSW Thesis Consent Form.pdf, Category: Consent Form;• Peer Parenting MSW Thesis Interview Schedule Final.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);• Peer Parenting MSW Thesis IRB Social Behavioral Form.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;• Peer Parenting MSW Thesis Recruitment Script.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk) on 1/25/2023.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

First, I am going to ask you questions about your experience being employed as a peer-parent in the child welfare context.

1. How long have you been a peer-parent?
2. Where have you worked as a peer-parent?
3. What motivated you to become a peer-parent?
4. How would you define the purpose of peer-parenting?
5. What is essential for you to perform your best as a peer parent?
 - a. Personally?
 - b. In the workplace?
6. What would help you have the greatest impact on your clients?
7. How have you been impacted by working as a peer parent?
8. What are the benefits of working as a peer-parent?
9. What are the disadvantages or challenges of working as a peer-parent?

Next, I am going to ask your thoughts about the general workforce of peer-parenting in child welfare, in other words, thoughts about employment as a peer-parent in child welfare.

10. How would you describe what the role of a peer-parent in the workplace should ideally look like? (This is not necessarily asking about the role you play with your clients, but rather what function peer-parents should serve in their place of work as a whole).
11. What do you think is essential for a peer-parent to understand before they begin working as a peer-parent?

12. What skills do you think are necessary for a peer-parent to have to be effective in their position?

a. How are these skills developed?

Lastly, in thinking about your future employment or involvement in this field...

13. What are your longer-term career goals?

14. What could happen that would prevent or deter you from pursuing/continuing work as a peer-parent?

15. What improvements do you think could be made in the peer-parenting workforce?

(By “workforce,” I am referring to hiring and employing peer-parents in the context of child welfare).