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## Parents That Help Build the Table

The Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention, The Children's Trust Fund, launched our Parent Advisory Council (PAC) in 2021. This 9-member council serves as a strategic partner to help ensure the leadership and involvement of parents in the ongoing planning, implementation, and evaluation of our programs. This work began with launching a planning committee composed of staff, some crucial partners and most importantly a couple of key parents to establish the purpose and roles of the PAC. After releasing an application, we relied on our grantee network to identify and nominate parents they have worked with through their parent education and support programs.

In spring 2021, we received over 20 applications and interviewed each applicant and ultimately selected 9 parents with an emphasis on having at least one parent from each of Alabama's seven congressional districts. This group of 9 parents not only represent diverse locations throughout our state, but they also represent different lived experiences, genders, races, and ethnicities including 2 father voices and a bilingual mother originally from Puerto Rico. After facilitating a two-day orientation with the newly established council in June 2021, we officially kicked off the PAC's work during the 2021-2022 program year with bi-monthly meetings for continuous parent input and engagement in our prevention work.

At the start of our program year, all 9 PAC members attended our annual Grantee Training in October 2021 to participate in educational sessions and network with prevention programs in their district and statewide. In a session for the entire audience of 300, we shared an overview of the PAC and its purpose and individually recognized each parent. This was followed with a panel discussion with 3 of the PAC members on the importance of parent leadership to further encourage parent engagement at the local level through our community-based prevention programs.



*Elizabeth Reddick, DC, FRIENDS PAC Member, at the Region 3 Meeting in Baltimore, MD*

In February 2022, the PAC helped celebrate and promote National Parent Leadership Month for the first time in our state by receiving a total of 8 local mayoral proclamations to recognize the month. They also utilized social media and awarded parent certificates in their community. During April 2022, National Child Abuse Prevention Month, the parents participated in local events and activities with grantees. One PAC member hosted a webinar through her organization on Child Abuse Prevention, and another PAC member was highlighted during the "Prevention with Purpose" video series as a part of the Child Welfare Information Gateway's, National Child Abuse Prevention Month website. Churmell's Story can be viewed here: [www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/multimedia-gallery/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/multimedia-gallery/)

Additionally, the PAC read and scored Children's Trust Fund grants by serving as a local grant reviewer of our three-tier grant review process to ensure direct parent input on the funding of our community-based prevention programs. Thus, our PAC has been engrained in many aspects of our agency's work and have added a critical parent perspective that was missing before.

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**Visit the PAC on the FRIENDS website at [www.friendsnrc.org](http://www.friendsnrc.org)**

## Ways that Parent, Caregiver, and Youth Voices are Influencing Federal Programs

The Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) program provides funding to states and territories, as well as Tribes, Tribal organizations, and Migrant programs to develop and maintain services, supports, and resources that strengthen families and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Some of the requirements of the CBCAP program include involving parents and others with lived experience in the planning process for assessing community assets and needs, and to develop leadership roles for the meaningful involvement of parents in the development, operation, evaluation, and oversight of the programs and services. The CBCAP program is a clear example of how federal funds are being used for the meaningful involvement of parents in various aspects of programming; however, the direct work to partner with families occurs at the state and local levels. Thus, it begs the question—is the government doing anything at the federal level to partner with parents and others with lived experience?

While I can't answer this question for the entire federal government, I can share information on some of the actions that I'm aware of and observations I've experienced where I specifically work—the Administration on Children and Families (ACF), the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) and the Children's Bureau. One of the ways ACF, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), has demonstrated its commitment to listening to and incorporating the voice of individuals with lived expertise is through its strategic plan. To develop the plan, ACF leadership listened to the thoughts and experiences of staff and other collaborative partners—including powerful conversations with program participants and grantees. During this process, families shared that they feel ACF programs are siloed and have high barriers to entry. Others

talked about the challenges of telling their personal and sometimes difficult stories over and over again. Parents, caregivers, and others with lived experience described their fatigue over helpful but primarily reactive interventions; they expressed a desire for proactive, upstream interventions that recognize not only their challenges but also their inherent strengths and treat them with dignity and respect. As a result, the strategic plan emphasizes action, cross-program problem solving, and continual learning through five high-level strategic goals that work to incorporate these important insights.

Meaningful engagement of parents, caregivers, youth, and others with lived experience is also a priority of ACYF and the Children's Bureau, which oversees the CBCAP program. In addition, the FRIENDS National Center for CBCAP and the amazing Parent Advisory Council, which puts together this great newsletter, the Children's Bureau's other T/TA providers also place significant value on working with individuals with lived expertise to influence their work. In particular, I wanted to highlight the Capacity Building Center for States (Center) and its strong commitment to infuse family and youth voices in all of its capacity building projects. To achieve this goal, the Center works to ensure that parents and youth are involved in Center projects from the start and have many opportunities to contribute their expertise and knowledge. This is accomplished in partnership with a team of family and young adult consultants, who contribute their diverse skills and expertise to the Center's T/TA activities with states. Examples include consultation with state child welfare agencies, developing written resources, planning for and administering virtual and in-person events (e.g., meetings, conferences, etc.), and others. Each consultant is compensated for their time and expertise.

The Children's Bureau's National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) is another example of how the Children's Bureau has worked to elevate the voices of parents, caregivers, and youth. Individuals with lived experience contributed to development of the agenda and members from FRIENDS PAC and Family and Youth Consultants from the Center are presenting in and facilitating plenary and break out sessions at this virtual conference (in April 2023). Moreover, ACYF and Children's Bureau leadership have taken steps to incorporate strategies that increase partnerships with individuals with lived experience in all ACYF. For activities (e.g., documents, events, etc.) that require leadership approval, ACYF staff must provide information regarding efforts and strategies to partner with parents, caregivers, and youth and directly incorporate their recommendations. To assist staff, HHS' Office of the Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation has issued a series of resources on key elements of lived experience in the context of health and human services work, and why engaging people with lived experi-

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### Parents That Help...

The only challenge has been to ensure the parents feel continuously appreciated and supported with sufficient staff and financial support in their various roles and responsibilities as PAC members. We have been very fortunate to have a strong and passionate group of parent leaders, and we want to ensure we are providing them continuous support and encouragement to remain involved and committed to illuminating the parent's perspective in all aspects of our prevention work.

Bailey McKell Waller  
AL Children's Trust





## The Importance of Partnering with Parent Leaders

For too long, citizens experiencing hurdles in their lives, while the strong arms of poverty ravage their family's nucleus, have been observed as incapable of providing solutions to their problems. On the other hand, some social service programs are created by politicians and lawmakers to fight against societal ills without the voice of parent leaders that carry the scars of difficult lived experiences.

Parental involvement is an important component of providing successful social services to families and children. When parents who have navigated social service agencies are engaged in the creation and execution of policies and programs, they can provide useful insights and help create more responsive and fair services.

Too often, however, government agencies create programs and policies without consulting the people who will be most impacted by them. This can result in policies that are unsuitable for the needs of children and families and can exacerbate current inequalities. Many agency practices have helped retraumatize, divide, and ostracize the family members that utilize the services regardless of how they enter in the system. Government agencies can develop more effective and equitable policies and programs by collaborating with parent leaders who have real experience.

Parent leaders offer unique views that can assist in identifying gaps in services and can also assist in making policies and programs more available and responsive to the varied needs of families and communities.

Co-designing policies and initiatives with parent leaders can help government agencies develop a trusting relationship with the communities they serve. Parents who feel acknowledged and valued are more likely to use social services and fight for their own needs and the needs of others. Co-designed initiatives can result in improved

outcomes for families and children, as well as a more efficient social safety net in general.

Government agencies must be ready to listen and incorporate parent feedback into their work in order to successfully co-design policies and programs with parent leaders. This includes giving parent leaders chances to engage in decision-making by providing training and assistance to help them develop skills and confidence. It's also important to ensure that parent leaders are paid for their time and experience. Imagine having paid Parent Leader Consultants within programs and agencies that can help create a better tomorrow for families and communities.

Finally, parent guidance is an essential component of successful social services. Government agencies can create more effective and equitable services to better meet the needs of families and children by co-designing policies and programs with parent leaders. We can build a more responsive and efficient social safety net for all if we value the opinions and experiences of parents.

*Michael Cupeles, NJ  
FRIENDS CBCAP Parent Leader*



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### ...Influencing Federal Programs

ence is essential, in particular to advancing equity.

One last observation that I wanted to note is a recognition from leadership that the above examples are indications of progress, but we still have work to do. I've also seen that most efforts to engage parents, caregivers, and youth are genuine with intention to truly listen and incorporate their desires and recommendations; however, mistakes are

made. We are all learning and will likely continue to take missteps, but I, for one, am encouraged by the commitment to making changes and that individuals at all levels embrace the fact that lasting change will only occur when parents, caregivers, youth, and others with lived experience are not just actively involved but leading the way.

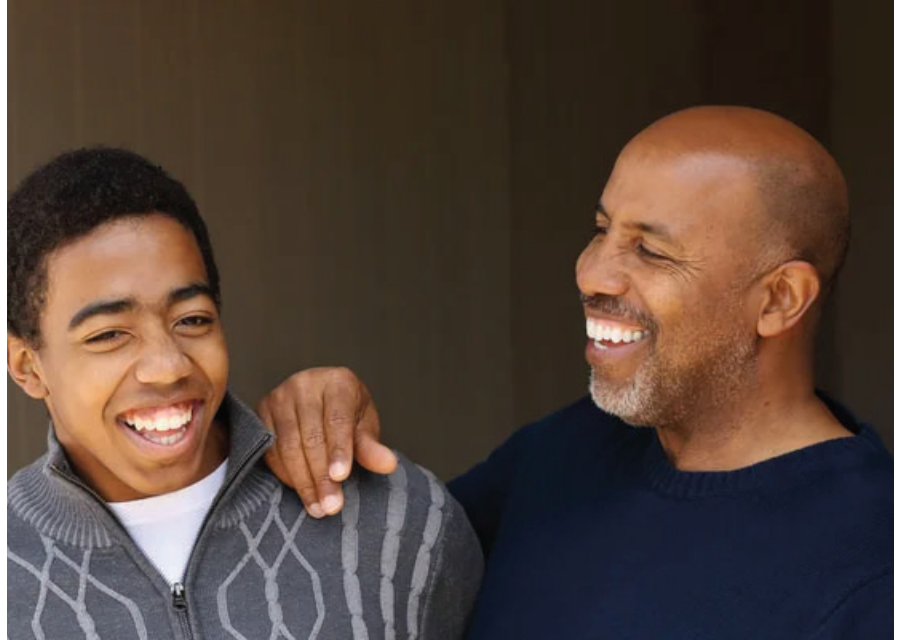
*Julie Fliss, CBCAP Federal Project Officer  
Children's Bureau*



## A Father's Journey

As a mentor with Morrison Child and Family services, I get to witness other fathers as they enter the courtroom when they become involved with child welfare. They usually come looking for answers and support knowing that it might come with a harsh penalty. Concerned and frustrated, they seem to already know that they will be fighting an uphill battle not just for their children but also for their role as a father. African American and Indigenous families are over represented in the child welfare system and some would argue that it is in direct relation to child welfare's policies that have created this imbalance (Chase & Ulrich, 2022). A community that knows these facts first hand often struggles to engage with and trust the system that is supposed to help. The importance of fathers cannot go understated. Statistics indicate that children who have fathers that are involved in their lives tend to have more positive outcomes in school, social life which lessens the impact of growing up in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

It brings me back to my own experience with child welfare. Feeling like I didn't have a voice when it came to my child. Never in a million years did I think I would be involved with child welfare but, looking back it was exactly the intervention my family needed during my own struggles with addiction. Facing DHS involvement, I just remember that everything that was said about me or written about me felt like a direct assault on my ability to provide and protect my child. These were words that wore heavy on my psych yet, through recovery work, introspection and therapy I had a new set of tools for parenting that brought the change which I needed and I will forever be in debt to those willing to walk that path with me. I had to confront many hurdles during that journey while learning how to face my own trauma and how it had showed up for me as a parent. I received supports from close friends and a supportive commu-



nity. I don't know how I could have retained my own sobriety or help mend the relationship with my son that I had ruptured without that help and guidance from others.

Fast forward to today. I see this very same scenario play out before my eyes with the men I get to help as they face many struggles. From addiction, mental health, housing, attaining employment, bias and negative stereotypes these men struggle with not feeling represented. As a parent mentor for Morrison, I get to advocate for others and promote a father's voice while they navigate their own journey within child welfare.

A case for a father can be a daunting experience depending on the circumstances. It would be nearly impossible not to be overwhelmed when asked by an agency to tackle so many required services. To maintain employment, treatment, counseling, child visitation, confront your own trauma's, parenting classes and court appearances in a state that ranks 50th in the US when it comes to access to services. Many of those who need services can be left on long wait lists when time is of the essence, stunting their progress that could have been attained.

Further exasperating the issue is

the perception of fathers and their ability to parent during this process. Some fathers do not feel they get equitable treatment compared to mothers as being the hands-on parent. *"The system can make you feel villainized. A lot of black men do want their kids but, find themselves having to do so much work to be involved. I can see why some men can give up hope. I felt like I couldn't show emotion nor make a mistake. Having the right parent mentor gave me a reference point. Knowing that my mentor had gone through some similar experiences really helped me"* (Anonymous Parent, 2023). *"Dads can be nurturing, and this can be overlooked by workers. One of the successes I see is when men ask for help. It is a sign of strength. They don't have to do this process by themselves"* (D. Kowalski, Parent mentor, 2023).

Fathers can and do show up when given the opportunity, guidance and the proper supports. *"It takes a long time for the system to believe in the dad, to build that trust, when fathers do the hard work they do get their kids back"* (R. Erlyson, Parent mentor, 2023).

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As I continue to work with these men, I continue to see the hope and growth that they have. How





## Above and Beyond



*Deputy Commissioner Rebecca Havick*

Parenting can be a challenge, but it is an honor! Serving as a Parent Leader is truly an ongoing learning experience. I believe parents do not need to ask permission to get involved in their communities on any level. Nor do parents need to meet some criteria to verbalize, organize and mobilize with others to be the change they want to build. My parent leadership journey began in my home and

I honestly feel I was called to this role. I have “quit” so many times because I just did not like the constant “brick walls” that I faced as a parent. Parent advocacy can be a roller coaster ride between all of the parent teacher conferences, board meetings, local meetings, state and federal meetings and meetings about meetings. For decades, I have felt like a photo opportunity or a check-off on a list to meet funding requirements. There have also been times when I’ve felt like I had to go along to get along.

Parent leadership and parental involvement is still not where I believe it should be. However, after serving with the Georgia Department of Human Services’ (DHS) Division of Family & Children Services (DFCS) Deputy Commissioner, Mary Havick, I was reminded of the song Georgia on My Mind. As a Black American, parent, educator and leader, I believe Deputy Commissioner Havick is using her influence and sincerely showing her commitment and concern for the safety and well-being of her

staff. And most importantly, she is seeking what is best for Georgia’s children and families.

I have served under Deputy Commissioner Havick on an external committee where she and her team addressed matters regarding the need for better practices. In a big way, she is responsive, respectful, and most of all, takes the role of having parents involved very seriously. Georgia’s child welfare system is a work in progress, and those who work within it have important responsibilities. Deputy Commissioner Havick takes her role in stride and goes above and beyond to prioritize parents as integral partners. I am pleased to highlight her and express my gratitude for her leadership and ongoing support!

*Eileen Graham, GA  
Georgia Parent Advisory Council  
(GPAC), FRIENDS PAC Member*

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## A Father’s Journey

these men yearn to be the provider and protector of their children. I hope that one day I can convince more of these men to be a guide for others, share their experience and use it to help other fathers as they seek to find their own path. My time with Morrison has been a blessing in disguise. For now, I get to experience other father’s successes and help change society’s perception of these men. My only hope is that more fathers get the support and encouragement they need to be involved in their children’s lives.

*Matthew Porter, OR  
FRIENDS PAC Member*



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Chase & Ulrich (2022). *A Connectedness Framework: Breaking the Cycle of Child Removal for Black and Indigenous Children* | SpringerLink

US Census Bureau. *Father Absence Statistics* (fatherhood.org)

R. Erylson, *Personal communication*, February 26, 2023

D. Kowalski, *personal communication*, February 6th, 2023



## The Rest is History

I was born and raised in south-eastern Kentucky. Together, my husband of 35 years, Brian and I have raised six children, three by birth and 3 through Kinship Care. Raising children is hard work and before doubling the size of my household, I worked for a community mental health agency providing family preservation and reunification services. I learned about the injustices in the child welfare system from that job. I advocated for families and children as much as I knew how. I never felt it was enough and it was like preaching to the moon. I felt patronized and invisible when people would smile down on me, thank me for sharing, and then proceed as if they never heard me. It was so frustrating.

When I decided to quit working outside of the home to focus on my children, I was determined to maintain connections with family serving organizations. I seized opportunities to share with resource providers in my area and became active with programs like the Community Collaboration for Children (CCC) which gave me the opportunity to meet Patra Gregory who later encouraged me to combine my professional knowledge with my parenting journey by joining our regional network meeting as a parent.

I attended these meetings in the past as a community service provider and despite having worked with many of these community partners before, I was viewed differently in my role as parent. However, I was invested and when Patra asked me to represent my region at the state level, I jumped at the chance! (Honestly, it was more because I would have a few days away from my children!) In this role, I was amazed at how our state technical assistance valued parents and trained them right alongside CCC staff. The other parents and I were supported to understand the systems, take on leadership roles (I served as secretary for the parent business meet-

ings) and return to our local communities and educate families. When the CCC State Parent position opened several years later, I was asked to interview and was selected to work alongside CCC's state technical assistants, Lynne Mason and Belina Turner.

I was nervous when Belina and Lynne expressed confidence in me and asked me to serve on state committees looking for parent voice. At the time, Kentucky was third for having more than 10,000 children in out of home care (OOHC), data that no state wants to be known for. I, the lone parent in the room, was part of a discussion with the newly appointed

cabinet official and others regarding the reasons for the number of children in OOHC. Unsure of what was expected of me, I listened and tried to learn.

As the meeting progressed, I became more and more agitated and angry at some of the things I heard from staff and community partners about families. Nothing good, that's for sure! From the back of the room, I listened to the Commissioner, someone asked why so many children were being removed, and she responded that she removed kids so she could sleep better at night, knowing the children were in a safe place.

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## National Parent Leadership Month Proclaimed in Slaton, Texas

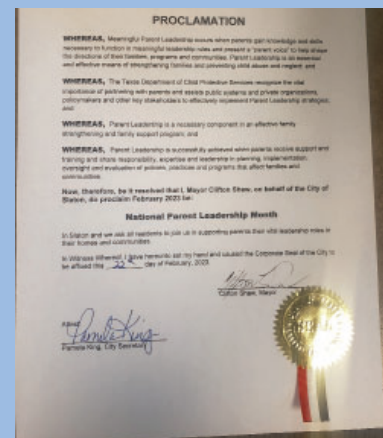
There are many parents throughout the United States who continue to use their voices, skills, and talents to ensure that the best interest of the family is pushed to the forefront. I am one of those parents. My life's experiences have not always been favorable (whose has?). My experiences have been the fabric that have been woven together to create the art of who I am: parent leader, parent advocate, parent voice, parent supporter, and parent educator.

There is always work to be done and it is because of my work as a parent leader that I was able to ask the cities of Slaton and Lubbock, Texas to proclaim February as National Parent Leadership Month. I am proud to share that both Slaton and Lubbock made the profound proclamation that February 2023 was National Parent Leadership Month.

*Paula Bibbs-Samuels, TX  
FRIENDS PAC Member*



*Clifton Shaw, Mayor of Slaton, TX (l) and Paula Bibbs-Samuels (r), FRIENDS PAC Member*





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## The Rest is History

That was the proverbial, "straw that broke the camel's back" for me. I raised my hand and when acknowledged by the Commissioner, I began to speak. I scolded the state for thinking I, as a parent, would not want to know my children were safe when they went to bed every night and how the system continuously failed families with unrealistic expectations of families. I identified how poverty was misinterpreted many times as neglect. I challenged how 'Family Team Meetings' were conducted by limiting the opportunities for parents to voice what they needed, removing children, and setting unrealistic expectations for reunification. I shared my experience of what I had to do to get my children back. How "if I didn't do it fast enough", or "get a job, apartment and transportation and pass random drug screenings" I wouldn't have custody returned. Layered on top of all those require-

ments was being forbidden to live with my significant other because he had legal problems or a substance abuse disorder, so now I would have to do everything on my own. I told them what they expected was nearly impossible for families to achieve. When I finally stopped talking with tears rolling down my cheeks, I sat down to a completely silent room with everyone staring at me.

It wasn't long after my outburst that the meeting ended. People thanked me for speaking and wanted to know where to find more parents willing to speak up about their lived experiences within the system. As I walked to my car after the meeting, I cried. I called Lynne and Belina to apologize for my blunt honesty and offered to help them find someone else who could be the voice of parents for CCC. I will never forget as I told them what happened and I heard Belina say to me, 'Oh,

we know. We have already been called.' More tears and apologies followed and finally Lynne and Belina stopped me and told me the Commissioner and other staff loved what I said, and asked if I would be willing to attend more meetings. And as they say, 'The rest is history.'

Today, I continue to work with parents, listen to their stories of loss and joy and promise to carry their voice forward and provide opportunities for them to speak as well. I serve on the FRIENDS Parent Advisory Council where I mentor parent leaders and share my experiences to inform prevention work at the state and national level. The confidence and support given by Lynne, Belina, and Patra was what I needed to truly be able to speak as a voice for parents and play a role in change process for a better system for families and children in our state.

Valerie Lebanion, KY  
FRIENDS PAC Member



FRIENDS Parent Advisory Council members (from l to r, top row): David Armstrong, Paula Bibbs-Samuels, Ashley Cox, Michael Cupeles, Eileen Graham, Joanne Hodgeman, Anntoinette Johnson, (from l to r, bottom row) Valerie Lebanion, Matthew Porter, Elizabeth Reddick, Ashley Schmit, Heather Stenson, Vadonna Williams, and Melissa Zimmerman.

### About the PAC

FRIENDS has established a Parent Advisory Council to provide useful overall program direction and guidance to the activities of the National Center. Council members share their experience and expertise in child abuse prevention and family strengthening through their active participation in FRIENDS workgroups and the annual Grantee's meeting, development/review of FRIENDS written materials, and by providing resource center staff with consultation and advice.

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