

Wraparound Practice: Chapter 4b.6

Family Stories about Family Partners in Wraparound

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Marlene Penn shares three stories of families who benefited from having a family partner involved in their wraparound process.

Family Involvement Center, Phoenix, Arizona

In this story, Dawn, the mother of a 13-year-old son with mental health concerns, shares her story about the critical role her Family Support Partner from the Family Involvement Center played in her family's experience with wraparound and in her own journey toward self-empowerment.

Having a family support partner [FSP] at first was a little scary for us. We had a lot of complex situations and needs in our family, and we had some bad experiences in the past with individuals who claimed to offer us support and help, so I was really skeptical. The FSP asked me to coffee and I thought, "OK what is this all about?" The last time I was asked to coffee by a behavioral health professional, it was to try and coax me to leave my husband because they thought he was not good for our family.

Well, this person gave me a totally different perspective. She was genuinely concerned and shared her personal experiences, which made me feel she was there to help me and not just my child. She began attending my child and family team meetings and was able to help get across what I was either wanting or trying to say. She also helped others to hear what our family needs were. In the child and family team meetings, she often stopped conversations, which were going full speed, to ensure people were really hearing us. She supported our

goals and desire to stay together as a family in a way that was strengths based. She understood the love in our family and how we needed to be there for each other. She was also very supportive when we had juvenile justice involved regarding our son, and attended court hearings with us often. That was not expected but greatly appreciated.

She was not the case manager, but was great at keeping us all on target, to move my family towards outcomes. She's truly seen us through the thick and thin of our lives, and let me tell you, we have been through a lot—trying to find community resources, and so forth. Just the time to get away and talk to someone without feeling like you are being judged was so important to us. Without our family support partner, I would have felt like I was wavering in deep waters without so much as a raft in sight. She was my anchor many times, and taught me how to advocate for my family in a way that was strengths-based and solution-focused for everyone involved in our team, but especially our family. My husband began to feel acceptance and support, rather than a harsh, judgmental atmosphere.

She continues to be a resource and a creative problem solver for us, and for other families. I call her and get her advice for others. I now work in the system to help families, and it was the excellent model that she set for me that allowed me to become a family leader. She did not encourage me to go in this direction, but she definitely inspired me greatly by her example alone.

Family Support Organization of Burlington County, New Jersey

Marie Vandergrift of Southampton New Jersey was actually the first to enter the wraparound process in her county, and she describes her experience of having a family partner as well as the overall impact of wraparound in her life.

They told me that a family support partner [FSP] would be coming with my care manager to meet me and my family. I didn't have to go anywhere! They came right to my trailer in a very heavy snowstorm. The care manager and her supervisor came in with the FSP for our first "face to face." Within about five minutes, my son said of the FSP, "finally, someone who understands." My

family partner really did understand because she had been through so many of the same problems with her family and child welfare. Our care management organization really tried to help my son and they did a lot. My family support partner and her whole organization were always there for me. They gave me so much courage. I was very timid. I would not speak up and I was very much afraid of child welfare. I learned so much from having my family partner there with me always.

She had invited me to come and speak at a legislative event. While we were in the car, I got a call from the residential facility telling me that my son would be discharged the following week. There was no transition plan to speak of. I was very upset and just kind of accepted it. My family partner coached me to discuss this with my care manager and to request a child and family team meeting, if I wanted to. My FSP dialed the number and asked me to take the phone. I felt timid but I wanted to do it. When the care manager wasn't there, she suggested that we call back and ask to speak to the supervisor. I was willing to try. The supervisor wasn't there either. "Let's try the clinical coordinator," my family partner said. So I did and I reached her. I did all of the talking with my cheerleader sitting right next to me. A child and family team meeting was called together promptly and I feel like I changed forever.

That day, I spoke with confidence before the legislature. My FSP never pushed me to do anything I didn't want to do, but she encouraged me to try things to empower myself. Today, I serve on the board of directors of the care management organization, Partners for Kids and Families. From my family partner and the whole family organization, I learned not to blame myself; I learned to empower myself and my family. I am a partner to the system, not a victim of the system. I didn't understand in the beginning why only my son was referred for wraparound. My other son needed more. The wraparound team supported my whole family.

Today, my daughter is on the planning board of the family support organization's Youth Partnership. Both of my sons are doing well and living independently. They are about to become fathers, and I am about to become a grandmother.

The Montgomery County Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Maryland

Celia Serkin, Executive Director, describes how important wraparound and having a family support partner was to Valerie Oliver and Sheila Ward before they both became family support partners themselves.

Valerie Oliver became engaged in the wraparound process when she felt that her life was spinning out of control and going downhill. She felt isolated and alone. She had no outside or natural supports to help her address her child's mental health challenges. Wraparound came into her life, and Valerie began to embark on a journey toward self-advocacy and self-efficacy.

Valerie had a care coordinator and a family support partner who jointly facilitated her child and family team. Her team members extended a helping hand and opened many doors that had previously been closed to her. Valerie's family support partner encouraged her to acquire survival tools that helped her to work towards achieving self-sufficiency. Her family support partner stressed the importance of Valerie maintaining her dignity and respect and having a choice about what she wanted and needed for her family. She guided Valerie and supported her in her decision to select the right path for her family. She acknowledged Valerie's strengths and needs.

Valerie began leading her own child and family team and creating a viable support system for her family. With the help of her family support partner and the care coordinator, Valerie and her team members implemented a clearly defined plan of care that had individually tailored goals. Her son got back on his feet and was able to be maintained in the community. Valerie restored her faith and had hope for a better future.

Sheila Ward felt that she was desperately in need of assistance when she began participating in wraparound. She had a child with mental health challenges, who had psychiatric hospitalizations and was having many difficulties. When Sheila became involved in wraparound, she was assigned to a partnership dyad consisting of a family support partner and a care coordinator. They came to Sheila's home when she felt that she was at her lowest point and in need of many services

and supports to uplift and empower her. They were caring and compassionate and helped Sheila build her own child and family team. Sheila related to her family support partner because they had similar experiences. Her family support partner explained the value of the wraparound process. Sheila felt hopeful because she saw that her family support partner was "in a good place." Sheila witnessed her family support partner co-facilitating her team and realized that she could learn to run her own child and family team meeting. Sheila is now a family support partner who provides support to families involved in wraparound in Montgomery County through Maryland Choices.

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Author

Marlene Penn's initial experience on care planning teams was as the parent of her own child. She subsequently became an advocate for other families and trains and coaches extensively on the role of the Family Partner on wraparound teams. Marlene served as one of the faculty members on the University of South Florida Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute Course "Wraparound Interventions and the System of Care" and is co-chair of the Family Partner Task Force of the National Wraparound Initiative.

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