

**Testimony for
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce
Joint Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary
Education and Higher Education and Workforce Development**

**Washington D. C., November 8, 2017
Submitted by Toni Miner, Family Support Partner**

Introductory Remarks

- My name is Toni Miner and I am a birth mother of three children and the legal guardian for my two grandchildren. I reside in Jefferson County, Colorado. I am pleased to be here today as a strong parent advocate who believes that families must be supported.
- I wish to thank the Committee on Education and Workforce and the Subcommittees on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education and Higher Education and Workforce Development for providing me with this opportunity to share my perspectives with you today. Thank you to Chairmen Rokita, Guthrie, and to Ranking Members Polis and Davis.
- I am here to talk with you about some insights that I have gained from my own life experiences with addiction and the child welfare system and my work as a family support partner and facilitator for Circle of Parents in recovery group.
- I want to briefly share my story and my work as a family support partner. I am making four recommendations that I believe will help to create strength in families.
 1. Collaboration across agencies.
 2. Focus on the family as a whole.
 3. Educate our communities and families regarding substance abuse.
 4. Partner with parents to work with other families before, during or after involvement with the child welfare and court systems.

Background– My Story

As I share a little of my story, you will see why I am urging you to act on these recommendations.

- I grew up in a home with violence and alcohol. To cope with this during my early years, I also got involved in using drugs and alcohol. I continued to use off and on throughout my twenties. Fall of 1996 is when everything changed for me and my daughters. We had suffered a traumatic event in our life and I went to meth to solve how I was feeling, or to not feel. My meth use became daily for me that year. Now I didn't see how it was affecting my daughters because I still took them to

school, provided a roof over their head, food on the table and clothes on their back. My disease convinced me that I was being a great Mom by providing for them. The one thing that they needed more than anything else in their life was a sober and protective parent. I couldn't give that to them. As time went on and my addiction grew deeper, I was no longer getting them to school like I should have been. Even when I was there, I wasn't there emotionally. Meth was giving me what I needed, (so I thought) but in turn it was taking everything away from my daughters, and from me. I loved them so very much and wanted to be better, but I couldn't, I was stuck in my disease. There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't love my daughters, as a matter of fact, on most days I used more to not feel the guilt and the pain of what my addiction (disease) had done to my family.

- Unfortunately, my two daughters had to live through my problems with substance abuse. As I struggled with my drug addiction issues my daughters were frequently moved in and out of placements with relatives and friends.
- Then I got raided by the police for possession and went to jail. I was devastated and didn't know how to get clean. I continued to make bad choices until I found out I was pregnant. So there I was - pregnant, scared, dealing with social services and facing a prison term of more than 30 years. By this time my daughters were eight years old and 14 years old. Thankfully I could plan in advance for my daughters to go into kinship care while I served my jail sentence.
- That's when I met a child welfare case worker who truly changed my life. Instead of telling me what a loser I was, he asked how he could help, how he could partner with me to get my children back and to stay out of prison! I looked at him in disbelief and I doubted he meant a word of what he said. But when he showed up in court to beg the judge to give me a chance, I looked at him and cried! Here was someone who truly cared about what happened to me!
- The judge was lenient and only sentenced me to 90 days in jail and six years of probation. Due to my good behavior, I only had to serve 60 days. My daughters were returned to my care the day that I was released with the understanding that I would comply with the probation requirements and complete intensive outpatient treatment. Along with continued work and support from my caseworker.
- This case worker became an amazing source of strength for me. He encouraged me to re-establish my relationship with my mom. I needed my mom to help me get clean. I believe that we all need our Mom in our life. I didn't have mine at the time due to my addiction and the pain that I had caused her. I had hurt her emotionally and financially. I needed my Mom to believe in me again, to help me with my girls, for moral support and help with transportation. To my surprise, my mom was there for me and still loved me very much and continues to do so to this very day.
- Getting clean was one of the hardest things that I have ever had to do. I had to attend different classes, complete regular drug screening and participate in many

appointments. I was given an opportunity to heal and knew that I would lose my children for good if I did not comply with all the requirements. Even though I was receiving the supports that I needed, my daughters were not. My daughters had suffered very severe trauma due to my addiction. I believe this contributed to their own addictions, as their trauma was never dealt with.

- Today, almost 16 years later, I am still clean and actively involved in a recovery program. I have rebuilt relationships with family. I have made many new friends. I have lots of supports in my life - church, my children's school, my neighbors and of course, my family. Each one helps me stay strong and determined to never again go where I once was. Not every day is perfect for me. Some days are very hard but I know now that I can make it.
- As I look back on the life I led then and the one I lead now, I realize that coming in contact with the judicial and child welfare system was not as bad as I thought it was at the time. I have learned a lot. My case worker and probation officer were so supportive and empowering. I doubt I would have survived as well without them. They showed me that creating and supporting strong parent partnerships was a critical part of their work in helping families be successful. They trusted me. They believed that I could change – that I could grow and that I could be a strong, resilient and healthy parent.
- Unfortunately, my poor choices did take a toll on my two daughters. Both girls followed in my footsteps and became addicted to drugs. My oldest daughter continues to abuse drugs and also has major mental health issues. When they were younger they didn't get services or education about how to understand their parents addiction (a disease) and strategies and steps to take to prevent their own addiction. They also didn't get the appropriate mental health services they needed after experiencing traumatic events.
- When I learned that my oldest daughter was unable to properly care for her two children, I brought them into our home and became a permanent kinship care provider for them. Today I am actively parenting my son Spencer together with my two grandchildren, Angel and Tavin. As a kinship care provider, I can make sure that my grandchildren are safe from any future harm. Part of my decision to be a kinship caregiver is because I wanted to avoid my grandchildren going into foster care.
- Kinship care providers are such an important piece to the opioid epidemic that we are facing. We open our homes and our hearts to the children of the addicts. By doing so children can still have the family connection that is so important to their success. Kinship care providers also need support from the community such as mental health centers, social services, financial, schools, respite care and any other systems that may be involved with the family. It is a lot for kin to take responsibility of children, but it can be successful if given the supports needed to ensure these placements are stable and supported. It's not easy being a kinship caregiver. With

the opioid epidemic, states and counties are seeing an enormous rise in the number of kinship caregivers, many of whom are much older than I am who are raising young children, and they need help to care for these children.

My Work as a Family Support Partner, Family Advocate, Educator and Collaborator on Systems Change for families with addiction and child welfare involvement

My life experiences have provided me with some amazing opportunities to help other families in various ways such as:

- Working as a Family Support Partner in Jefferson County, Colorado to educate families and help them advocate for themselves on how to get their needs met.. A Family Support Partner is a parent or caregiver who has faced and overcome many barriers. Because of their unique perspectives and personal experiences, they are in a position to assist other families facing similar challenges in navigating multiple systems and locating community resources. The goal of the family support partners is to empower each family with the skills and knowledge to advocate for their own supports and connections within the community, and identify the best ways to ensure their voice is heard by the professionals they work with.
- A Family Support Partner empowers families by providing impartial support during meetings (e.g. family engagement meetings, team decision meetings, school, court, therapy, etc.); assistance in identifying community and natural supports; and support planning to prepare for future crisis and emotional support.

I worked with a family who suffered from opioid addiction and helped them to find the light within themselves and navigate these systems. I attended court regularly with the mother and attended school meetings for the children. The mother expressed her gratitude to me for how I was supporting not just her but also her family, as addiction is a family disease.

Facilitating a Circle of Parents in Recovery Group:

- The model is based on the following network standards to guide group implementation:
- The groups utilize the mutual self-help support model.
- An educated group facilitator and parent leader facilitate the support groups.
- Open groups meet regularly and are offered at no cost to any participant.
- Children's Program or Childcare Available
- The group facilitator, parent leader and other group members are available to one another between group meetings.
- Group members are assured of confidentiality in a non-judgmental environment within the limits of the law.
- Community resource information that supports healthy family development is available to all group members.
- Builds positive peer support networks

- Prevents relapse and sustains recovery
- Prevents future child abuse or neglect.

We have partnered with Betty Fords Children’s Center to educate our children group facilitators on their curriculum. This curriculum really helps children aged 6 to 14 years old learn that their parent’s addiction and recovery is not their responsibility. They also learn about addiction itself. They learn about their feelings in regard to their parents addiction and how to heal and work through them. The children learn how to share their feelings, and that they are not alone.

- Facilitating Family Leadership Training Institute (FLTI) to help families become engaged in civics, and identify their leadership skills in their communities.
- Educating caseworkers, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers and kinship care providers by sharing my story to help them understand that even with some of the toughest families that they come across there is indeed hope. We have conversations about partnering with the families that they are working with, to get to know the families so they can work collaboratively and to help them understand that there is not only one way to work with families, because every family is unique.
- Serving on various state and local committees such as:
 - Collaborative Management State Steering Committee
 - Child and Youth Leadership Commission, Juvenile Justice Subcommittee
 - Child and Youth Leadership Commission, Human Trafficking Subcommittee
 - Child and Youth Leadership Commission, Education Subcommittee
- Collaborating with numerous advisory groups such as the Casey Family Programs Birth Parent Advisory Committee (BPAC) and the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN) to help make system reform and support families.

Recommendations.

Based on my own experiences with my family and now as a Family Support Partner, I am recommending the following:

1. Collaboration across agencies is a must to ensure that children and families are getting the right services they need efficiently.

- Families interact with multiple systems with their own requirements, processes and it is essential that these systems work together to ensure families get the help they need. Law enforcement, child welfare, schools, mental health, housing, courts,

hospitals, employers, substance abuse programs and methadone clinics should all be part of the process to help strengthen families struggling with addiction.

2. Focus on the whole family

- Provide support groups for the whole family. Addiction is a family disease and if the whole family is not treated history will continue to repeat itself, as it did within my own family
- Circle of Parents are specialized parent support groups designed to build protective factors in families. Examples of current focus areas include: Recovery Support, Parents and Families affected by Substance Use, and Parents and Families Impacted by Trauma.
- For example, parents need to hear that everyone has frustrations and problems and that it's okay for them to reach out for help without it creating more problems for them. Parents get isolated and think they are the only ones feeling overwhelmed or too ashamed to ask for help.
- Speaking from my own experiences, families at risk respond best to supportive and strengths-based approaches. I really appreciated the support and the trust that I received from my child welfare case worker and probation officer. They both believed that I could change and become the strong, resilient and healthy parent that I am today.

3. Educate our communities and families regarding substance abuse.

- Public Service Announcements that talk about substance abuse and mental health and how they often go together, including available resources for treatment.
- Share success stories of the families that are successful.
- We must educate our children of their own risk of being addicted. I talk with my children about it often, because it is not something that they think about every day. We need to have a prevention education for the children of adult addicts.

4. Partner with parents to work with other families before, during or after involvement with the child welfare and court systems.

- We need to partner with parents like me who have learned from their own experiences and can help other families navigate effectively access services and complex systems. Many states and local jurisdictions are implementing parent

partner programs and finding that this can be a very useful strategy to effectively engage parents in their child welfare cases and treatment.

- I would have benefitted greatly from having a parent partner who could have talked with me and provided me with support and assistance to navigate these systems.
- The perspectives of parents like me are important if we are to truly achieve better outcomes for children, families and communities. Policymakers, administrators, front line workers, and others interacting with families need to listen and understand the experiences and needs of families directly as they make decisions that will impact lives.

If we implement these recommendations and invest in families, the sky's the limit in what we can achieve together. I strongly urge you to implement these recommendations.

Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions that you may have.