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**Building a parent-led movement to transform child welfare**

**INTRODUCTION: A CALL TO EMBRACE PARENT ADVOCACY**

In this paper, we call on the United Nations to embrace parent advocacy and the advocacy of extended family as an essential means of achieving children’s rights and better outcomes for children and their families. The United Nations and member states have the opportunity to tap into an experienced and inspired body of parent leaders who are already working in countries around the world to transform how alternative care systems engage with families and to build community solutions that reduce overreliance on alternative care. Parent participation is both a right and fundamental to protecting the rights and meeting the needs of children. We ask the Committee on the Rights of the Child to urge member states to make parent advocacy a cornerstone of their efforts to keep children out of alternative care.

This call to action is in line with fundamental U.N. values. U.N. conventions and other instruments on the rights of the child are replete with references to the primary role that parents, family and community play in protecting children, while all discussion of alternative care in U.N. documents starts with the imperative of avoiding child-family separation whenever possible.

Parents’ perspectives are critical to making placement in alternative care truly the last option. Parents know what caused their family breakup, what enabled them to stay together in crisis, what allowed them to rebuild after separation, and in most instances, parents are also the primary way that children’s rights are protected. Moreover, in places where parents who once lost their children to alternative care have found roles supporting other parents to keep or bring their children home, parents reunify their families more quickly, and children spend less time in alternative care.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Against the grain of the larger society, which frequently demonizes system-affected parents, organizations led by youth in care and care-leavers often recognize the importance of partnering with parents as forces for change. They know, too, the personal and communal healing possible when system-affected children, parents and other family members work together to end the trauma of family separation. In the United States, for example, the Family Voices United campaign joins the largest system-affected youth organization in the country, the largest network of system-affected parents, and relative caregivers to drive change in foster care.[[2]](#footnote-2) In Winnipeg, Canada, where the overwhelming majority of children in alternative care are First Nation, Fearless R2W, a grassroots organization working to keep children out of care and to strengthen community connections weakened by historical oppression, is co-led and co-founded by a recent care-leaver and a “super” granny with lived child welfare experience as child, mother and grandmother. [[3]](#footnote-3) [[4]](#footnote-4) "When designing policy alternatives or solutions, those who have been most affected should have the most power and influence and in the case of children, must include their parents or guardians," said Michael Champagne, Fearless R2W co-founder. In addition, recent interviews of care-experienced youth by care-experienced youth in Scotland and Canada found that many youth believe that the loss of their parents’ rights and power has meant the loss of their own rights. Interviewees stated: “Being in care takes away your rights. Now strangers who don’t know you and don’t care make all the decisions” and “It should not be a choice between support or your family….You should get to have both.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

We ask the Committee on the Rights of the Child to lead the way in supporting parent advocacy, first by making space for parent voices in the upcoming Day of General Discussion, and then by urging member states to promote an influential role for parents and other family members in child protection decision-making and in the development of community solutions that keep children in safe, nurturing, stable families and out of alternative care.

**BACKGROUND: THE HISTORY AND IMPACT OF THE INTERNATIONAL PARENT ADVOCACY MOVEMENT**

In 2018, a group of system-affected parents and allies gathered in Edinburgh, Scotland, to found the International Parent Advocacy Network (IPAN) and spread the movement of parent advocacy in alternative care internationally. Some founding members had been working in parent advocacy in alternative care since the movement began in the early 1990s. Others had only just started to build it. Of the 17 members present, nine were impacted parents. Their own life stories reflected critical issues facing affected families, including:

* the lack of due process protection in child protection decision-making;
* the role of poverty in pushing children into alternative care;
* the inadequacy of early supports and community connections to keep children out of alternative care;
* the overrepresentation in alternative care of groups that have experienced historical oppression, and the loss of community and culture as well as family this frequently entails;
* alternative care’s inadequate response to trauma and intergenerational trauma;
* and alternative care as its own intergenerational trauma.

The fact that half the parents present had been in alternative care as children before their own children were taken from them meant they understood the devastating reality—found all over the world—that far too often, children with system involvement become parents with system involvement, yet another reason why it is essential to prioritize both youth and parent leadership.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In a searing open letter to funders arguing for the importance of supporting parent-led organizations, one IPAN member, a parent with lived child welfare experience, explained how the stigma of growing up in care follows children into adulthood. Drayak wrote:

“When I was born my mother was just 13 years old and had fled a children's home into the arms of a John.[[7]](#footnote-7) My social work files read that I was taken into care at 4 after a drug raid on a warehouse uncovered a small girl left behind when the adults fled….

Ironically, I did not even know my own story until it was used against me in court by child welfare services. The local authorities used the records of my childhood to try to justify applying for 'non-consensual' adoption of my daughter when all other false accusations had failed....Let me share with you that it is a special kind of hell to be powerless to stop your child experiencing the same trauma you experienced by the state.”

While one parent needed justice, Heather Cantamessa, president of IPAN, knew she also needed help, but was too afraid of losing her children to ask for it. In an interview in Rise magazine, Cantamessa explained:

“I was taught to fear the system from the time I was young. My mother ran away from horrific domestic violence and she always told us, ‘You cannot talk about what happened or what is going on. If they know they will take you away and we will never see each other again.’

The child welfare system came into my life three times. Each time I knew I needed help, but I really believed I would be punished if anyone saw how much I was struggling. It was only when I had my last case that I learned: If you ever want to be free of the system, you have to begin to open up and build a support network.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

In a recent interview, Cantamessa reflected on the lessons of her experience for the role of parent advocacy in system reform. “Parents understand the risk of losing their children when they come forward with a problem. They also know the ways it’s acceptable, in their own culture, class and community, to ask for help, and what will bring them shame. Parent advocates are able to translate these issues across culture and class to the people in power.”

Today, parent advocates work supporting families in countries including England, Scotland, Wales, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, Norway and Finland, while IPAN’s recent work in Russia and Bulgaria makes clear how needed parent advocacy is throughout the globe.

In all IPAN member countries, parent advocates work within and outside alternative care systems to support individual parents, by providing them hope and understanding; teaching them the system’s rules and language; connecting them to services; and advocating for and with them, at family team meetings and throughout their case. Numerous studies have shown the life-changing impact of this practice. A 2009 study found that when parents had a Parent Partner on their legal team, approximately 60% of families reunified within 12 months, compared to 26% where parents were not served, while a 2012 study found that families were four times as likely to reunify if parents participated in a Parent Partner program.[[9]](#footnote-9) [[10]](#footnote-10) A 2020 study on the efficacy of a Child Welfare 101 class created and run by parent advocates in Washington State found that 70% of parents who participated reunified with their children, compared to 53% who did not. For parents who also received individual parent advocacy support, reunification rates rose to 79%.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Parent and other family members are also active in practice and policy change. In many countries, parent advocates have created written materials and shared their stories so that other parents know better how to navigate alternative care and family court systems. Parent advocates work as trainers and consultants in alternative care systems, deepening officials’ understanding of parents’ and families’ experiences, and spurring practice changes. Parents and grandparents also advocate for fundamental policy reforms. In Australia, Grandmothers Against Removal New South Wales has partnered with local officials to draft guiding principles for strengthening the participation of aboriginal families and communities in child protection decision-making, so that the devastation of aboriginal families by child protection practices can one day come to an end.[[12]](#footnote-12) In England and Scotland, parents who experienced prolonged separations due to false accusations of abuse by the medical establishment have organized to tell their stories to the press and expose the faulty scientific basis of the policies that prompted their children’s removals, leading child welfare systems this year to begin to review and rewrite their policies on bruising in babies.[[13]](#footnote-13) In the United States, Rise, an organization of impacted parents, released a paper laying out a vision that it is using to advocate for investing in community solutions that reduce overreliance on alternative care.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Parent advocates have spearheaded reforms from the inside, as staff members of alternative care agencies and community consultants, and from the outside, by calling attention to injustices through the media, grassroots organizing and legislative advocacy.

Our work at IPAN shows us the power of parent advocates learning from each other across cultures and borders. We hope that U.N. member states draw on the experience of this international movement to strengthen parent advocacy in their own countries.

**CONCLUSION: NEXT STEPS**

The responsibility of the state to provide support to parents and other primary caregivers is an essential part of fulfilling children’s rights. Ensuring the availability of parent advocacy and peer support is a critical part of that.

For the past 30 years, parent advocates have:

* advocated for the rights of parents, children and families;
* connected parents to resources that keep children out of alternative care;
* provided a safety net for children within extended family and community;
* supported parents to navigate systems that are isolating, stigmatizing and frequently hostile, and served as symbols of hope that reunification is possible;
* supported families to heal so that children come home and stay home;
* acted as personal and cultural mediators between parents and systems;
* and advocated for fundamental changes in how countries and jurisdictions treat families.

We ask that:

**Recommendation:** The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child consider and assess the extent to which parent participation and advocacy is a key element of child protection systems in its review of the implementation of the CRC by member states.

**Recommendation:** An influential role for parents in child protection decision-making and in the development of community solutions that reduce overreliance on alternative care be promoted.

**Recommendation:** Additional U.N., government, NGO and foundation resources—financial, organizational and individual—be devoted to expanding the participation of parents in child protection decision-making and in developing community solutions that reduce overreliance on alternative care.

**Recommendation:** Governments that support parent advocacy or are considering doing so be encouraged and supported.

**Recommendation:** The role of parent advocacy in alternative care cases involving children and/or parents with disabilities be promoted, recognizing that disabled children and parents frequently face deep discrimination and inadequate support.

**Recommendation:** Recognizing the historical use of alternative care systems to destroy Native American cultures in North America, Aboriginal cultures in Australia, and indigenous cultures throughout the world, parents, grandparents and other family members from indigenous cultures and other ethnic, immigrant and refugee groups be supported in organizing for community control of alternative care systems and building community solutions that reduce overreliance on alternative care.

**Recommendation:** Organizations that bring together system-affected children and parents to work to end the intergenerational cycle of alternative care placement be supported, and alternative care systems be urged to collect data on and work with those with lived experience to address this tragedy.

The United Nations has the opportunity to strengthen the bonds between children and their parents, extended families and communities, and to promote healing where those bonds have been broken. We call on the United Nations to embrace and support—with words, deeds and money—the role of the parent advocacy movement in keeping children in safe, nurturing, stable families and out of alternative care.

1. Better Care Network and IPAN. 2020. “International Review of Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare: Strengthening Children’s Care and Protection Through Parent Participation.” New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://familyvoicesunited.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This term refers to elders who take responsibility for the well-being of the community at large. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://fearlessr2w.ca/about-us [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Excerpted from interviews, conducted by Cadence and Aurelia Drayak for the organization Teen Advocacy, of fifteen care-experienced youth in Scotland and seven care-experienced youth in Canada; https://teenadvocacy2020.wordpress.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rise. “Where I Come From Doesn’t Determine Where I Will Go: A Guide to Partnering With Parents to Break the Intergenerational Cycle of Foster Care Placement.” *Rise Insights #1,* pages 5 and 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A John here refers to a client of a sex worker. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rise (2015). “‘I Made a Mistake’ Not ‘I Am a Mistake,’” page 9. *Rise Winter 2015*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Better Care Network and IPAN. 2020. “International Review of Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare: Strengthening Children’s Care and Protection Through Parent Participation. New York. Page 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Better Care Network and IPAN. 2020. “International Review of Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare: Strengthening Children’s Care and Protection Through Parent Participation. New York. Page 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Trescher, Sarah; Summers, Alicia. January 13, 2020. “Outcome Evaluation Report for Washington State’s Parents for Parents Program,” Capacity Building Center for Courts. Page 1.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/download?file=426247> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lucy, Adams. BBC News (June 27, 2019). “I Was Suspected of Causing My Child’s Illness.” <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-48770748>; Elliot, Claire, Butterworth, Annie. The Scottish Daily Mail (June 28, 2019). “Two mothers reveal harrowing ordeal of being WRONGLY accused of child abuse after doctors suspected them of faking their children’s illnesses.” <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7191663/Mothers-reveal-GP-WRONGLY-accused-harming-children.html>; Hoyle, Antonia, “Heartbreaking legacy of the babies taken from their mothers for a single bruise.” The Daily Mail (March 31, 2021). <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-9423783/amp/Heartbreaking-legacy-babies-taken-mothers-single-bruise.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rise (2021). “Someone to Turn to: A Vision for Creating Networks of Parent Peer Care.” *Rise Insights #3.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-14)