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CENTERING PARENT LEADERSHIP IN THE MOVEMENT TO ABOLISH FAMILY POLICING

This Piece was written by the entire Rise staff: Teresa Bachiller, Jeanette Vega Brown, Ashanti Bryant, Keyna Franklin, Teresa Marrero, Genevieve Saavedra Dalton Parker, Tracy Serdjenian, Bianca Shaw, Halimah Washington, Robbyne Wiley, and Imani Worthy. It was edited by Nora McCarthy.

“To change everything, we need everyone.”¹

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¹ Greta Thunberg et al., *Why We Strike Again*, PROJECT SYNDICATE (Nov. 29, 2019), <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/climate-strikes-un-conference-madrid-by-greta-thunberg-et-al-2019-11> [<https://perma.cc/V3SC-DQ9P>].

I. INTRODUCTION

The expertise and leadership of parents and youth with lived experience of family policing belong at the center of the movement to abolish the system, just as Black folk are centered in Black Lives Matter.² Those personally impacted and affected by a system should be the lead and face of advocacy, using their first-hand experience to lead the movement in the direction they choose based on insights that only they have. No one understands the repercussions of a system more than those who have experienced it themselves. They have the most to gain in mobilizing for change and the most to lose in the status quo. Those without life experience can be helpful in advocating for and contributing to a movement—but allies should not set the agenda. In the movement for family policing abolition, parents, youth, and families who have been directly impacted by the system must be the architects of their own activism and political agenda—with the allyship of advocates, academics, community organizations, and city agencies doing what it takes to truly serve their constituents.

This Piece shares the work Rise has done with intensity since 2018 to build both an organizational culture that invests in and centers parent power and a political vision that centers parents' expertise.³ Founded in 2005 and led by parents impacted by the family policing system, Rise believes that parents have the answers for their families and communities. Our mission is to support parents' leadership to dismantle the current family policing system by eliminating cycles of harm, surveillance, and punishment while creating communities that invest in families and offer collective care, healing, and support. We pursue our mission by creating safe spaces where impacted parents can reflect, heal, connect with peers and share in peer support, learn about abolition and the family policing system's history and policies, strengthen their writing, public speaking, and advocacy skills, and mobilize their communities for justice.

In a 2019 strategic planning retreat, the Rise staff decided to informally but actively begin to engage in inquiry and learning about abolition together. In 2020, Rise held an all-staff abolition retreat led by Bianca Shaw and Genevieve Saavedra Dalton Parker that brought everyone together to learn about abolition and coalesce around our vision for our work. Rise then continued our abolition learning together by engaging all staff in the process of developing this Piece over the course of five months in 2021.

² Rise is using the term “family policing system” instead of “child welfare system” because our team believes that it most accurately and directly describes the system’s purpose and impact. Keyna Franklin, *Why We’re Using the Term ‘Family Policing System’*, RISE MAG. (May 7, 2021), <https://www.risemagazine.org/2021/05/why-were-using-the-term-family-policing-system/> [https://perma.cc/EW99-5FGW].

³ In this Piece, we use the term “parents” to refer to parents who are or have been involved with the family policing system (in their capacity as parents). This may include experiencing an investigation, preventive services, foster care, and/or termination of parental rights.

Each staff member contributed their ideas by writing sections of the planned Piece and/or through personal reflections.⁴ Some staff chose to talk through their ideas, with notes taken and shared back to them. These drafts and notes are quoted throughout the Piece. Staff also engaged in one-on-one conversations, small group discussions via Zoom breakout rooms, and readings together to ask questions, process, and share our learning and reflections. Multiple drafts were shared with the entire group, discussed, and incorporated as revisions. Our process of learning about abolition and becoming an abolitionist organization is continuing beyond the development of this Piece.

Writing this Piece was conceived as a way to go deeper in our learning. It also required revisiting our understanding of abolition. In exploring what parents wanted to say about abolition, together we confronted the issue of how the language of abolition created a sense of exclusion—that even though it comes from our communities, it does not feel like it is for us. Parents are marginalized and not listened to in their own movement about issues they experience. A group of staff met weekly to explore the tenets of abolition, with a focus on the tensions, confusion, and challenges within Rise and the parent community around abolition. In particular, staff delved into issues of tokenism, marginalization, exclusion, and lack of safety in movement spaces related to abolition. We then shared practices that Rise parents have found valuable in combating those dynamics.

We offer this Piece to share our expertise, which has led Rise to bring together a staff and senior leadership mainly of people impacted by systems of family separation,⁵ and to develop training programs and organizing efforts that build relationships, peer support, and the political power of parents. We honor non-impacted people doing legislative advocacy, media work, consciousness-raising, and academic work aligned with movement building, including many who share their expertise with Rise or work within Rise.

We also share in this Piece the challenging work of exploring an abolitionist framework alongside parents with a wide range of views, including parents who enthusiastically embrace abolition as well as those who are skeptical of the radical optimism at the heart of abolition. Growing a movement requires deep engagement with parents around a political vision. A “system response” to parents who are in a process of exploring what it will mean for their lives to abolish the system might be to abandon, shame, and isolate them from a growing movement to end the harm of family policing.⁶ Rise, in contrast, has been committed to being *in* that process with parents to learn, grow, and strategize together to shrink and

⁴ Every staff member is listed as a co-author of this Piece.

⁵ Three quarters of the staff and leadership are impacted people.

⁶ One of Rise’s core values is resisting system dynamics. The family policing and criminal legal systems operate in ways that punish, shame, isolate, dehumanize, and discard people and take away their decision-making power over their own lives. Contact with the system is often inherently traumatic and harmful.

ultimately abolish family policing systems. As Greta Thunberg said, “In order to change everything, we need everyone.”⁷

II. THE NEED TO CENTER PARENTS IN THE MOVEMENT TO ABOLISH FAMILY POLICING

Movement organizations, coalitions, and convenings must intentionally attend to the ways they make space and center parents. Otherwise, these movement spaces will naturally be inaccessible and inhospitable to all but a few parents, and the movement will stall. Social action must reach the streets to amass the public pressure needed for significant change. That requires parents mobilizing parents and connecting to their communities about what they want to change. Movement spaces where parents feel outnumbered, dominated, unheard, and sidelined cannot build political power.

And yet, in the movement to end family policing, parents are actively tokenized and marginalized in many of the movement’s spaces. There is no real investment in honoring parents’ expertise. In Rise’s many years of experience in this movement, we have observed that most movement organizations do not employ parents with lived experience at all or only employ one or two. Few parents are on staff anywhere at a leadership level. Parents are invited to be speakers at the forefront but rarely hold real power to determine strategy.

Little effort is made to create a sense of safety, belonging, and connectedness for parents—in short, to see their humanity. Instead, many movement spaces internally reproduce dynamics of white supremacy and capitalism, not only centering white leadership (including at Rise) but centering those holding credentials and positions of power and legitimacy that impacted parents are locked out of. Parents in leadership have often needed to rely on and partner with non-impacted professionals in order to be invested in or seen as legitimate by potential allies or funders.

The reality is that non-impacted people act as gatekeepers to the level of power and decision-making that parents have. The message to parents is that, just as the system prosecuted them as unfit to raise their children, non-impacted professionals in the movement also dismiss them as unqualified and incapable of leadership. The biases of their closest allies are a barrier that impacted parents face in getting their voices heard.

If impacted parents and families are not centered in the movement, it is likely that changes will not effectively identify and get to the root issues and may even cause further harm to families. As one staff member Robbyne put it: “You’ve never been Black. You’ve never been through it. So how would you know what we need? We’ve been through it, so let us express our needs and listen. Don’t act like you are listening and go ahead and do what you planned to do.”⁸

Moreover, naming reality is a form of power, and those with the power to name “the problem” determine the framework for solutions. In the United States, many “problems” are named through the perspective of

⁷ Thunberg, *supra* note 1.

⁸ Robbyne Wiley, Senior Parent Leader, Rise, in New York, N.Y. (2021).

white supremacy. For example, our society defines the problem of mass incarceration as “Black men are criminals” rather than as “Black men are impacted by institutional racism within education, legal, and economic systems.” White people have the power to systemically:

[s]et the standards by which people of color are judged; make and enforce decisions that may negatively affect people of color; have access to the distribution of resources that shape the lives of people of color; and define the parameters and frameworks within which conversation takes place, and policy is set.⁹

That form of oppression is reproduced when movement leadership by those not impacted by the family policing system name the problem and solutions. That power must be held by those impacted, and their solutions must be uplifted by movement allies.

III. BARRIERS TO PARENT MOVEMENT LEADERSHIP

Historically, organizing by and for parents separated from their children by the state has been limited compared to advocacy and community-building around other racial and reproductive justice issues. Parents name the horrific experience of system involvement itself as the greatest barrier to movement participation. Mothers in particular experience state sanctioning of their parenting as shameful, since motherhood is central to their identity for many of them. Parents traumatized and dehumanized by system involvement in their lives do not want any reminders of it once they are free. As Jeanette wrote:

Being the person who had their life crumbled and destroyed by the system is the worst experience of my life. I said after my reunification that I would not think of child welfare or have anything to do with it ever again. Not my problem, not my concern. I was out and free and I wanted to keep it that way.¹⁰

Parents also describe system involvement as a form of bodily violence. Keyna has written:

ACS is like going to jail. They tell you what to do to get your life back. You have to jump through hoops to make people happy but then you are not happy because your children are not happy. Then, when your children come home, you’re still in jail because you are being watched with everything you do in your life.¹¹

In 2015, Antoinette wrote in *Rise* about making a “submission” in court instead of taking her case to trial:

⁹ Lisa Albrecht & Juliana Keen, *Title IV-E Curriculum Module: White Privilege and Racism in Child Welfare*, CTR. FOR ADVANCED STUD. IN CHILD WELFARE 3 (Dec. 2009), <https://casw.umn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/WhitePrivilegeSubSum.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/4LR2-NTS6>].

¹⁰ Jeanette Vega Brown, Co-Executive Director for Leadership and Policy, *Rise*, in New York, N.Y. (2021).

¹¹ Keyna Franklin, Assistant Editor, *Rise*, in New York, N.Y. (2021).

Tears rolled down my face as I made my submission. My legs were weak. I thought I was going to faint. I felt drained, like the system had broken me [T]he judge said something like: “Do you understand what you are saying? Is anyone forcing you to say these things?” It felt so crazy, like a rapist was forcing me to say that I’d wanted it.¹²

Mobilizing against family policing requires talking and thinking about the system and hearing about other people’s experiences. “It’s easy for people to talk about the system when they have never felt its pain,” wrote Keyna, “but it triggers families who have. Nobody wants to talk about it. It brings up old stuff that you don’t want to talk about or hear.”¹³ Parents triggered in movement spaces are at a disadvantage compared to allies as they cope with intrusive trauma responses, physical reactions like sweating and trembling and feelings of being overwhelmed and threatened. Jeanette described her first step into advocacy this way:

I was invited to a support group in the Bronx, and as I walked in and sat and listened, my first reaction was. “Run as far away as you can.” That part of my life was over, forgotten and erased. “Why did God bring me to this place?” I thought to myself. As I sat there, I could feel my pain coming back. I never dealt with it, it was just deleted as a bad dream. The other parents made me feel their pain, which was hard to swallow as it was the first time feeling mine too. I cried and went home and just cried some more. I didn’t understand anything I was feeling.¹⁴

Activism also requires coming into contact with system professionals, making demands that other people have the power to refuse, and coping with feelings of being unheard, shut down, villainized, and powerless once again. Parents experience those feelings not only from system leadership and those in political power, but within movement spaces. Keyna wrote:

You don’t want people to tell you how you feel. You don’t want people to judge you for having a case or getting your children removed from your care. You fear that they might say, “It didn’t happen that way” and, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” It’s painful. That’s a reminder of how ACS came into your household or talked to your children’s school and your children’s doctor and your neighbor, and looked at you as if you’re not human.¹⁵

Parents feel stigma and shame even in movement spaces and in their closest relationships. “Parents are afraid of what the people around them think and feel about their involvement with the system. Public trust is in the system, and that creates public scrutiny against parents. After

¹² Antoinette Robinson, *Coerced In Court – I Wish I’d Never let the Court Find me Guilty of Neglect*, RISE MAG. (Sept. 1, 2015), <https://www.risemagazine.org/2015/09/coerced-in-court/> [<https://perma.cc/U4AQ-VX23>].

¹³ Keyna Franklin, *supra* note 11.

¹⁴ Jeanette Vega Brown, *supra* note 10.

¹⁵ Keyna Franklin, *supra* note 11.

being villainized by such a toxic system, who honestly wants to go through that?" Imani wrote.¹⁶

The system already came and ruined our lives, what more can they do? But living with the shame of having to go through the experience is real. We've been conditioned to be ashamed of these things. We've been conditioned to be ashamed of who we are. Society labels parents who have had their children taken away as bad parents.¹⁷

In addition, parents entering activism are often still experiencing a great deal of crisis in their families, even once their cases are closed. Active investigations and other family stresses are threatening and draining, and demand their immediate attention. These parents can bring important information and perspectives to the movement, but they also need spaces to be holistic, flexible, and healing. At times, they also need movements to support them with connections to resources. Otherwise, their advocacy will be derailed. In other words, centering parents in the movement requires investment in parents. Building parent power means centering the needs and desires of those who have been directly impacted by a violent system. It means making space and actively supporting parents in taking it.

At the same time, accessing much of the technical knowledge needed for policy advocacy and legislative reform requires working within or in close proximity to the system, as does direct support work with system-involved parents. Many parents feel distrust about working with people who work in or in close proximity with the system that tore their family apart. It is common to fear being subjected to vulnerability and powerlessness by negotiating with them once again. "Helping parents get out of the system meant that I had to work with the system, and from the start that was very hard," Jeanette wrote.¹⁸

I started in conferences where my role was to listen and give parents the resources to avoid the system separating their families. Some families unfortunately still got their children removed, and once again I saw how the system has so much power and say over families' lives. I would leave those meetings feeling defeated and powerless again.¹⁹

Countering these dynamics requires actively investing in parents and creating safety for them. Halimah said:

What is helpful is the time spent seeing each other's humanity. That means asking people to share their pronouns, to share their ideas, doing check-ins, making group agreements, and making sure we all adhere to them, and checking each time we meet to make sure we're still in agreement. It means calling people or going to their house if you haven't seen them in a while. It's about investment in

¹⁶ Imani Worthy, Public Speaking Coordinator, Rise, New York, N.Y. (2021).

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Jeanette Vega Brown, *supra* note 10.

¹⁹ *Id.*

people's wellness and seeing them, and helping people get things off their chest, because healed people heal people.²⁰

These intentions and practices create a sense of safety, belonging, and connectedness that is not often available to parents, because these experiences are counter to the norms of the family policing system and of white supremacist, capitalist society more broadly. Halimah added:

People in marginalized communities often have to deal with numerous systems—education, housing, medical—with inequities and inadequacies, and that are not designed to see our humanity and understand how we're connected. In housing, it's "We're the experts and you need to sit down and learn from us." The medical system knows more about you than you know about yourself. In the education system, the attitude is "You can't tell us anything, we're the educators." A movement space should respect and honor that everyone has something to contribute. But movement spaces have also been guilty of rubbing people the wrong way and rubbing people out.²¹

Moreover, parents often feel unwelcomed in movement spaces that are defined and controlled by allies, not parents. At the most basic level, parents are usually outnumbered, even in movement spaces, and especially in who is convening and leading. Jeanette wrote: "In my experience, it's always been one parent to 10–20 other stakeholders at the table, all making decisions for our families. Those dynamics must change for real parent power to come through."²² In contrast to many allies who pursue years of training to become, for example, a lawyer or organizer, parents impacted by family policing join the movement because of something unwanted that happened to them and their family. Parents come into movement and advocacy work based on their experiences, commitment, and passion to create change, but without specific preparation for movement work. Investing in impacted parents' training prepares parents with the knowledge and skills needed for this role, and uplifts the strengths, interests, talents, and connections that they already have and bring to this work.

Another barrier is language. Ashanti wrote: "People may use terms that are available mostly to people who have law, social work, and other advanced degrees. Those who don't understand the jargon can be intimidated, isolated, and excluded in that environment."²³ Allies not only have technical knowledge and insider information that parents do not have access to, they also set norms about language, the pace of meetings, the framing of the problem, and often the strategy and solutions. Teresa B. said:

In lots of groups you have a bunch of white people in the highest paid jobs speaking the language that we don't

²⁰ Halimah Washington, Community Coordinator, Rise, in New York, N.Y. (2021).

²¹ *Id.*

²² Jeanette Vega Brown, *supra* note 10.

²³ Ashanti Bryant, Program Assistant, Rise, in New York, N.Y. (2021).

Speak, and you don't walk in those shoes. You see parents in quiet mode because the pace you're moving at is so fast that there's no communication. You're excluding people from where they could make a change.²⁴

Those closest to conforming with the styles, beliefs, and capacities of allies are most heard. Halimah said:

If you don't speak properly, if you don't look the part, play the part, act the part, there is no real respect given. You're ignored, or people label you as angry, or too demanding, or dumb, or "not appropriate for the message we're trying to convey." They shame and isolate you into hopefully conforming to whatever it is they want you to do. People who can do that are elevated, there's investment, they're given opportunities to speak or be the face of something, they're propped up. Other people are left to fall to the wayside. People that can't speak the part, they start to feel ashamed of their experiences. They start to think that what they have to say is not valid. Their voice is not heard or honored, and they shrink back into the same spaces that they're trying to get out of because that's a place of comfort, familiarity and respect.²⁵

Of course, there is much that allies do not understand in what parents say, either. But allies do not lose power when they do not understand parents, and that double standard speaks to the power imbalances that may arise in these spaces. As Teresa B. said: "*They* have the ear of the community, but *we* don't have any power."²⁶

This dynamic especially impacts parents whose lived experience does not conform to movement narratives. Just as some efforts to end mass incarceration have focused on non-violent offenses, messaging on family policing has emphasized poverty, medical misdiagnosis, and neglect, shaming and marginalizing parents whose histories include real harm to their children. Halimah said:

People are pitted against one another in what's considered acceptable and unacceptable. It's elevating those charged with neglect and almost hiding the folks charged with abuse. It's about easy wins and easy stories. Neglect is easier to resolve. It takes real work to move to a place of understanding, taking accountability, and transforming harm into healing.²⁷

Since allies, not parents, typically hold institutional power, they are in the position of inviting parents into movement spaces, not asking parents how to be in allyship. To parents, that means that they are able to

²⁴ Teresa Bachiller, Rise & Shine Program Coordinator, Rise, in New York, N.Y. (2021).

²⁵ Halimah Washington, *supra* note 20.

²⁶ Teresa Bachiller, *supra* note 24.

²⁷ Halimah Washington, *supra* note 20.

act for their families and communities only at the pleasure and around the priorities of more powerful people.

Teresa M. vividly described being “just a face in a space” on the board of a community organization focused on families in her neighborhood.²⁸ At first Teresa and the other people “with the title L.E. next to our names (Life Experience)” did not notice the dynamic:²⁹ “We were so happy and so proud to be a part of something that is life changing for the life of the neighborhood. I never saw myself being part of the bigger picture. I always had that drive in me so I was just glad to be there.”³⁰ But the space was not welcoming. “Plenty of times I sat in meetings and I was clueless. There were never any check-ins or opportunities for clarity. I just sat there and eventually figured it out on my own.”³¹ After almost a year, real decisions needed to be made, but the consensus from the community members was not validated or taken into consideration. Teresa M. added: “I was there as a community member but I can’t even think of an instance when we opposed something and our opinions were heard.”³²

IV. CHANGING CULTURE: THE RISE EXPERIENCE

Rise, founded in 2005, can share the expertise we have gained in becoming substantially parent-led—with three-quarters of the staff system impacted—and in working to more equitably distribute the right to comfort, access, and power.³³ Folks who have been listened to, trusted, and invested in by society generally do not share the intersection of identities (race, gender, class, etc.) of impacted parents. Centering parents requires investment in people who do not have access to the social capital and trappings of prestige that accelerate power. In 2018, after a period of rapid growth, we began intentionally naming and combating oppressive dynamics in our work; otherwise, power and marginalization would continue to be present within Rise according to the same lines that cut through our society.

The first step, decided in an all-staff retreat in 2018, was to establish Rise & Shine, our leadership training program for new parents. Parent staff developed and lead the program, which meets three days each week for eighteen weeks, offers a stipend, and focuses on core elements of movement leadership, including confidence and connection. Teresa B. said:

²⁸ Teresa Marrero, Parent Advocate Training Coordinator, Rise, in New York, N.Y. (2021).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ By “comfort” we mean to refer to the experience of emotional comfort and inclusion that lies in not being othered or made to feel othered all of the time by group norms of education, wealth, whiteness, and discourse, as well as employment roles, positions, and power. See Tema Okun, *White Supremacy Culture*, in *DISMANTLING RACISM: 2016 WORKBOOK* 28, 35 (2016), https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf [<https://perma.cc/6QML-E6A5>] (problematizing the “right to comfort” of those in power, which functions to set norms and standards that “make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards . . . really only allow[ing] other people and cultures to come in if they adapt or conform”).

Family policing doesn't give you support, doesn't show that you matter, that your voice matters. It knocks you down, breaks you down. The system makes people feel weak. You don't have control over your life. The system makes you feel and think that you can't trust anyone, even other people who look like you. Part of abolition is about building something else—a support and care network.³⁴

In Rise & Shine, ally guest speakers present alongside Rise parent staff, past Rise & Shine graduates, and parent advocates working in New York City, in order to provide parent participants with information about the system's history and legal frameworks, systemic oppression, coping with trauma and stress, the parent advocacy movement, community organizing, and movement building. The program also includes a writing workshop series, a public speaking workshop series, and a "mini-project" that brings together storytelling and advocacy. Teresa B. said:

We educate each other and draw connections with each other and our history. We create a healing space to feel empowered and safe, motivated and accepted. When there is an issue or a crisis, we provide support without violating someone. We help people improve their management skills for working with others. We recognize people and remember people and give each other support.³⁵

Most important is that Rise & Shine offers a safe space for parents to talk about their experience with the system without fear of retaliation or shaming. Keyna wrote:

Parents need healing. Once you get involved with the system, you are never the same person. What you went through will always stay in your mind, body and soul, and when you hear other people talk about the system, it will bring up all the feelings you have. Not talking about it can be very harmful to you and your family. If you are holding it in, it feels like you can't breathe. If you talk about it, it won't take it away, but you can breathe easier.³⁶

Rise & Shine seeks to make a safe space for parents to write, speak, and heal. The program uses restorative justice circle keeping to give participants a chance to share and hear from each other, and pairs parents up through a buddy system so that parents can check up on each other.³⁷ Robbyne said:

³⁴ Teresa Bachiller, *supra* note 24.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Keyna Franklin, *supra* note 11.

³⁷ See generally *Lesson 3: Programs – Circles*, CTR. FOR JUST. & RECONCILIATION, <http://restorativejustice.org/restorative-justice/about-restorative-justice/tutorial-intro-to-restorative-justice/lesson-3-programs/circles/#sthash.EZMFqq7s.3X3ufNoE.dpbs> [<https://perma.cc/PW5C-YWKU>] (defining and explaining restorative justice circles through their origins in Native American cultures, and tracing their "adaptation to the criminal justice system" as a means of forming "closer ties" and "sharing the justice process" with the community). Today, circles are used in many settings and for different goals and purposes. They are used not only in the criminal legal and juvenile legal system, but in workplaces,

I call the parents at night to remind them about the program, and we have our little conversations. It's always somebody at Rise that will listen to what you say, help you get where it is that you're trying to go. We tell them, "You know, we're your new family. We're not going away."³⁸

Keyna wrote: "We let them know that this is a community and the community supports healing each other."³⁹ She names the *Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice* as a resource: "It urges racial justice advocates to invite more healing into our lives and restorative justice advocates to bring more warrior energies into theirs."⁴⁰

The writing and public speaking workshops offer parents a chance to reclaim a story too often told by the system: a judge, a parent's attorney, a caseworker. After being silenced, parents are finally able to speak for themselves in the workshops. Imani wrote:

I came into Rise & Shine as an impacted parent who knew that I wanted to be able to support and empower other mothers who had been in a similar situation. Even though I am rightfully angry at the system, I had the opportunity to heal and learn about restorative justice practices, envisioning safe and strong communities, and abolition. What I liked the most about the program is that I didn't feel like I was the only one. Everyone, including the facilitators, contributed to our community. It never felt like there was a power dynamic. That is so important. I felt safe.⁴¹

Imani was able to own a stigmatized identity—"angry Black woman"—that the system tried to use against her. She wrote:

I remember the system lawyer suggesting I go to anger management. People with fiery tempers are often also passionate, with a strong sense of right and wrong. Because of my anger, I have been able to turn that into passion to advocate for social awareness of the harms of these systems,

schools, and community groups and organizations. Circles can address harm and conflict. They emphasize accountability and relationships as they consciously enlarge the circle of participants. They may include those who have been harmed, those who have caused harm, their family members, community members, etc. Circles are also a proactive strategy for building relationships, supporting healing, and preventing harm. Participants pass a talking piece to assure that each person has an opportunity to speak. One or two "circlekeepers" serve as facilitators. In Indigenous communities, elders play an important role in the process. The process is values-driven and voluntary. See Shakira Paige, *Building Safety in Community Through Restorative Justice*, RISE (July 6, 2021) <https://www.risemagazine.org/2021/07/building-safety-in-community-through-rj/> [<https://perma.cc/URY2-CZFZ>] (detailing the thoughts of Ashley Ellis, co-founder of B.R.E.A.T.H.E. Collective, who trained Rise staff, on restorative justice circle keeping); see also KAY PRANIS, *THE LITTLE BOOK OF CIRCLE PROCESSES* (2005); HOWARD ZEHR, *THE LITTLE BOOK OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE* (2d ed. 2015); B.R.E.A.T.H.E. COLLECTIVE, <https://www.thebreathecollective.org/> [<https://perma.cc/3FL6-LTZP>].

³⁸ Robbyne Wiley, *supra* note 8.

³⁹ Keyna Franklin, *supra* note 11.

⁴⁰ *Id.* (citing FANIA E. DAVIS, *THE LITTLE BOOK OF RACE AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE* (2019)).

⁴¹ Imani Worthy, *supra* note 16.

to fight for abolition, and to have a platform through Rise to do so.⁴²

Beyond Rise & Shine, we needed to address dynamics of investment and vulnerability for parent staff. Bianca wrote:

At a 2019 retreat, staff raised tensions within the organization, asking, “What *is* a parent leader? What does Rise really mean by building parent leadership?” What parents were really asking was: What makes Rise credible to create a vision for parent leadership when they themselves often did not feel supported or invested in by the organization?⁴³

This critique was unsurprising. For some time, it had been clear that some parents held increasingly greater responsibility, and in turn received greater investment from senior staff, while other parents were stuck. This was not only a skills gap. The culture of the organization left them feeling highly vulnerable and uncertain about their role and their future at Rise. That, in turn, held them back in making demands and taking risks to push for what they needed and deserved. Robbyne said:

Parents come in interested in doing things, but if you can’t understand what you’re doing, you start sliding back in your seat, you just drift. I know that’s me. I don’t want to speak up because I think people will think, “Why is she here? How is she with Rise if she doesn’t understand?” I didn’t want to leave Rise, but I felt that if I showed how confused I was, I was going to get pushed out.⁴⁴

These are system dynamics; Robbyne feared that if she asked for help, she would get punished. She likened the sensation of pressure and confusion in some Rise meetings to the sense of threat she felt in foster system meetings about her family: “I felt so lost, so scared, that if I don’t know the answer, I’m not going to get my children back.”⁴⁵

Rise needed a stronger set of organizational practices to combat fear and vulnerability and to meaningfully invest in parents to build depth of knowledge, alongside confidence and capacity to contribute. Bianca wrote:

First, I turned to Black queer feminist teachings. As an organization that is primarily staffed by directly-impacted people, many of whom identify as Black women and women of color, Black queer feminism provided a framework to consider how intersecting oppressions show up within our organization. Working with directly-impacted parents means taking into account their experiences as not only survivors of the family policing system, but also survivors of

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Bianca Shaw, Co-Executive Director for Programs and Culture, Rise, in New York, N.Y. (2021).

⁴⁴ Robbyne Wiley, *supra* note 8.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

racism, classism, sexism, ableism and other forms of oppression.⁴⁶

To address how these experiences impact parents in Rise as a workplace and in the larger movement, some of our first key learnings came from adrienne maree brown's book, *Emergent Strategy*, which explores "how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for."⁴⁷ brown shares individual and organizational practices that move us closer to the power dynamics and interpersonal dynamics we want to see in the wider world. She names the principle "small is all" as a reminder that the movement we are building and the world we are trying to create will reflect our daily choices and practices.⁴⁸ We cannot know what it really means to call for parent and community investment without first practicing that in a "small" way within our organizations and movement.

Likewise, Cara Page and Adaku Utah's workshop "Reclaiming Resilience and Building Collective Care" and the book *The Thin Book of Trust*, which they introduced in the workshop, brought us the concept that relationships are the foundation of our work and our ability to free ourselves.⁴⁹ Relationship-building is not only about safety; it is about building the informal networks that offer guidance, support, and—particularly in workplaces—access to information and power. While organizations can build formal structures to increase inclusive and transparent decision-making, individuals with strong relationships are most able to informally gain access and build influence. Parents are not usually navigating professional spaces where they are regularly connecting to others with knowledge, power, and privilege who are discussing theories and visions, sharing insider information, and informally making decisions. Bianca wrote: "Our connections to others are important—they get us in doors, help us learn and grow, make us more visible and give us more power. Parents are shut out from these connections."⁵⁰ Giving attention to relationship-building is a form of opening up access to power.

Tema Okun's article on *White Supremacy Culture* and Aysa Gray's article on *The Bias of 'Professionalism' Standards* also name harmful dynamics that are present within Rise: moving so quickly to respond to external demands that inclusive understanding and decision-making cannot happen; having limited transparency around decision-making; and granting non-impacted staff a "right to comfort" while parents are left feeling vulnerable.⁵¹ These dynamics are not specific to Rise but are deeply rooted and widespread symptoms of white supremacy and other forms of oppression. These practices exist within the larger non-profit industrial

⁴⁶ Bianca Shaw, *supra* note 43.

⁴⁷ ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN, *EMERGENT STRATEGY: SHAPING CHANGE, CHANGING WORLDS* (2017).

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ Cara Page & Adaku Utah, Workshop on Reclaiming Resilience and Building Collective Care (May 17–18, 2019) (supported and organized by the Audre Lorde Project 3rd Space Collective); CHARLES FELTMAN, *THE THIN BOOK OF TRUST* (2d ed., 2021).

⁵⁰ Bianca Shaw, *supra* note 43.

⁵¹ Okun, *supra* note 31, at 29, 31, 35; Aysa Gray, *The Bias of 'Professionalism' Standards*, STAN. SOC. INNOVATION REV. (June 4, 2019), https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_bias_of_professionalism_standards [<https://perma.cc/5QJB-FA7W>].

complex as well as within movement spaces that aim to undo these same conditions.

Bianca led an initiative to create wellness in the workplace and address parents' critiques. First, she met with each staff member individually to conduct an assessment based on *The Thin Book of Trust*. Staff responded to questions related to four categories outlined in the book: sincerity, care, reliability, and competency. Bianca then held several staff discussions using a restorative justice approach to name common themes, tensions, and hopes. To ensure that all voices were heard in these discussions, we established community agreements for how we would communicate and used a process called "dotmocracy" to identify issues most important to staff. We discovered that staff held conflicting perspectives that impacted our ability to trust each other. Parents observed that our values seemed misaligned; the same values were not upheld by everyone in the organization. Furthermore, without having named our organizational values, we had no basis to determine whether our practices were living up to them.

This led the organization to commit to creating practices that build trust, ensure that all voices are heard, move toward radical vulnerability, and create a space where parents, especially, can be heard without fear or repercussion.

As a result, Rise made shifts to balance our ambitious external agenda with our ambitious internal agenda of equity. We:

- defined our organizational values and began co-creating values-based community agreements in all programs to commit to how we will work together;
- increased transparency, as many parents felt they held little information or power in organizational decisions;
- created a leadership team so that more people hold information and provide input into decisions;
- developed a management structure that aligns with our values, integrating our values into annual reviews that support investment in staff development; and
- trained all twenty staff and contributors in circle keeping.

Our supervision structure focuses on skills development and supports relationship-building. It includes making space to acknowledge how the work may impact us and how experiences in our personal lives and society (i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic, state-sanctioned murders of Black people) impact our work. We provide feedback in both directions, giving everyone space to make mistakes and strengthen skills. We seek to create an environment that allows us to learn about oppression, abolition, and leadership development, and in turn to apply that knowledge. As Robbyne said: "So much will be on our plate and we move so fast, but we always have the time for parents. No matter how fast we're going, we put on the brakes, and that is so important. A lot of parents are still so alone."⁵²

⁵² Robbyne Wiley, *supra* note 8.

At first, we saw this organizational change work as being about becoming anti-oppressive and trauma-informed. Over time we named that it is about healing justice and abolition. We then worked from that intentional goal.⁵³ Abolition is not just about toppling systems, but also about cultivating spaces where people feel seen, safe, affirmed, courageous, and respected. If we can build this culture inside Rise, we will know deeply what it takes to create different conditions for families in impacted communities.

This work at Rise is still beginning, but the difference is palpable. Today, most of our programs are led by directly-impacted parents.⁵⁴ Rise is presently co-directed by two women of color—Jeanette Vega Brown, a parent impacted by the family policing system, and Bianca Shaw. Just as importantly, we continue to center relationships, collective care, and accountability in all of our work. This is the foundation of our abolitionist vision and our contribution to the movement for family justice. Without centering relationships to “sow seeds of equity,” as Imani has said, we cannot claim to be creating a world where people are in a position to take care of each other and have everything they need to do so.⁵⁵

Teresa M. described community organizations as places that “bring the strengths out in people” and “with a belief system derived from people who have the same lived experience.”⁵⁶ Organizations that employ people with “L.E. after their name” or that seek to include and share decision-making authority with parents, youth, and families need to build processes that intentionally invest in and center their power. Movement-building isn’t about grooming stars but about building teams and recognizing an authentic place for everyone. That requires doing the work in ways that intentionally center people with marginalized identities. Organizations that do not meaningfully and structurally center parents need to ask, “What does allyship mean for us? How can we be allies in this movement instead of holding space at its forefront?”

⁵³ See generally Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *A Not-So-Brief Personal History of the Healing Justice Movement, 2010–2016*, MICE MAG., <https://micemagazine.ca/issue-two/not-so-brief-personal-history-healing-justice-movement-2010%E2%80%932016> [<https://perma.cc/2XDG-TDAR>] (discussing healing justice); see also *Healing Justice*, TRANSFORMHARM.ORG, <https://transformharm.org/healing-justice/> [<https://perma.cc/9DJK-HSFU>] (defining healing justice as “a framework that identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds”). The healing justice framework is particularly significant for honoring inter-generational trauma, building political meaning, and confronting oppression within liberatory social movements. *Id.* (referring to “build[ing] political and philosophical convergences of healing,” “heal[ing] on our terms,” “honor[ing] the trauma and resilience of generations that came before us,” and “support[ing] the self-determination, interdependence, resilience [and] resistance of those most impacted.”).

⁵⁴ Keyna Franklin, *Our Leadership is an Extension of Our Values*, RISE (Oct. 12, 2021), <https://www.risemagazine.org/2021/10/our-leadership-is-an-extension-of-our-values/> [<https://perma.cc/Q9A2-9KPY>].

⁵⁵ Imani Worthy, *supra* note 16; Keyna Franklin, *Our Leadership is an Extension of Our Values*, *supra* note 54.

⁵⁶ Teresa Marrero, *supra* note 28.

V. CENTERING PARENTS' POLITICAL VISION

Over the same years that Rise has shifted our organizational culture, we also shifted our mission toward a new north star: community investment, collective care, and support for families so that they can live in communities free from harm and have the resources for a strong family life without system involvement.

Rise began to move toward an abolitionist vision as we reckoned with the reality that New York City has halved the number of children in foster care only through a dramatic escalation in the system's surveillance, monitoring, and intrusion in families.⁵⁷ In 2017, as activism to end stop-and-frisk made visible the reality that surveillance has no correlation with safety,⁵⁸ and as a painful child homicide launched a classic foster system panic with rising hotline calls and family separations,⁵⁹ parents at Rise began to wonder how we could work on reducing all forms of system contact with families. That led, over time, to abolitionist learning.

This work has needed to move in tandem with our culture shift. Four years ago, people on staff did not have enough interpersonal trust, a framework to envision action, or a sense of hope and possibility to do radical reimagining together. The process broke down. A series of facilitated retreats in the summers of 2018, 2019 and 2020—the last one focused exclusively on understanding abolition—created an intentional space for working through the issues.

Engaging with abolition as a framework, practice, and strategy has been complicated. It has shown us that abolitionist movement-building with parents will require a significant investment in consciousness-raising and community organizing. Parents have always been engaging in abolitionist work. At the Child Welfare Organizing Project, advocacy began in peer support groups; there was always something to eat in the fridge, and parents could let their kids play while they picked up flyers about community resources or used a computer to access the internet.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Rachel Blustain, *Surveillance Isn't Safety – How Over-Reporting and CPS Monitoring Stress Families and Weaken Communities*, RISE (Sept. 17, 2019), <https://www.risemagazine.org/2019/09/surveillance-isnt-safety/> [<https://perma.cc/L6SH-PEPH>].

⁵⁸ James Cullen, *Ending New York's Stop-and-Frisk Did Not Increase Crime*, BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUST. (Apr. 11, 2015), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/ending-new-yorks-stop-and-frisk-did-not-increase-crime> [<https://perma.cc/TMF4-L2AL>].

⁵⁹ *One Element of NYC Foster Care Panic Eases; Everything Else Still Stinks*, NAT'L COAL. FOR CHILD PROTECT. REFORM: CHILD WELFARE BLOG, (July 20, 2018) (citing ABIGAIL KRAMER & ANGELA BUTEL, NEW SCH. CTR. FOR N.Y.C. AFFS., CHILD WELFARE SURGE CONTINUES: FAMILY COURT CASES, EMERGENCY CHILD REMOVALS REMAIN UP (2018)), <https://www.nccprblog.org/2018/07/one-element-of-nyc-foster-care-panic.html> [<https://perma.cc/465Y-KGHJ>] (describing the foster care panic proceeding from the child abuse-related homicide, and summarizing continued “overload[]” of the family regulation system); see also *Yes, NYC, There IS a Foster Care Panic. The Mayor's Own "Management Report" Proves It*, NAT'L COAL. FOR CHILD PROTECT. REFORM: CHILD WELFARE BLOG (Sept. 26, 2017), <https://www.nccprblog.org/2017/09/yes-nyc-there-is-foster-care-panic.html> [<https://perma.cc/N5FD-57ZL>].

⁶⁰ Jeanette Vega Brown, *supra* note 10. The Child Welfare Organizing Project is a decades-old community-based group of and for parents impacted by or at risk of impact by the ACS in New York, with the aim of “assert[ing] a powerful, countervailing parent voice in ACS policy and practice.” Mike Arsham, *How the Child Welfare Organizing Project Helped*

Yet many NYC parents joined in advocacy at a time when sitting at the system's table was viewed as a path toward meaningful power to protect their families and communities. Still today, working within the system or in partnership with the system as parent advocates is often the only funded and clear path for parents who want to make change and support other parents. With that context, abolition would mark a radical shift in tactics. In de-centering the system's power, it challenges all of us to recognize the failure and even harm of reforms that many longtime advocates, including parents, worked passionately to enact. In centering community change over system change, it requires reorienting and building new structures of power and believing in the potential of untested new approaches. It also means envisioning and expanding our understanding of the roles that parents can and do hold in this movement.

In staff conversations and a series of structured Community Conversations that Rise held with dozens of parents over the past year to develop a parent-led, parent-centered platform and vision for New York City, we heard enthusiasm for abolition mixed with real concerns. Parents were clear that they want supports outside of the system and from other parents impacted and in community-based organizations not tied to the system in any way. They named the reality that system entanglement in support does not keep children and communities safe; it drives a wedge between children and parents and between organizations and the communities they serve.

Yet parents also raised concerns that resources families rely on would be eliminated without any parallel investment and that parents currently involved in the system would be abandoned by advocates playing a long game, leading to greater harm, separation, and suffering. Keyna wrote: "You can't let the system go without having something else to support the family."⁶¹ Some parents were having a difficult time imagining anything different because the family policing system is connected to everything involving children. In many conversations, parents said that the system controls access to important services that did actually help their situation, like priority childcare and housing vouchers, even though they wished they did not have to experience the harm of the system itself to get access.

Some parents also voiced disbelief that safety can be accomplished for all families without reliance on systems and questioned whether allies fighting to abolish family policing recognize real harm. In their own lives and advocacy, parents have experienced and witnessed significant violence including child homicides, children and women trafficking, sexual abuse and rape, and children's abandonment related to drug use, mental illness, or domestic violence. Imani wrote: "People connect personal traumas to the needs of keeping systems open. I hear parents who have been impacted, have had their and their children's lives traumatized by the system, and still have faith in the system to go against 'bad parents' who are actually

Bring Parent Advocacy to NYC's Child Welfare System, INT'L PARENT ADVOC. NETWORK, <https://toolkit.parentadvocacy.net/cwop-parent-advocacy/> [<https://perma.cc/KJV9-RCVJ>].

⁶¹ Keyna Franklin, *supra* note 11.

hurting their children.”⁶² While abolitionist approaches to prevent and address serious harm, including domestic violence and child abuse, exist in various ways, the wider public has yet to recognize, explore, and expand on those practices.

Lastly, the enormity of “changing everything” can “just seem intimidating and out of reach to even begin to tackle,” Ashanti wrote.⁶³ “These systems are so embedded in racism and destruction that it’s hard to understand or where to begin to rewire and fix that we’ve been so accustomed to.”⁶⁴ Abolition requires radical imagination, hope, and belief that our society can be different, at both the structural and interpersonal level. It contends that we can treat one another differently. That we can heal. That our relationships can become stronger. That a neighbor will provide. That punishment and banishment are not effective solutions. That white supremacy can be overcome. Ambitious dreaming can be challenging to hold on to for parents impacted contending with conditions of oppression in everyday life. As Teresa B. put it, “When *I* go outside, I see the sidewalks are still all cracked from corner to corner, and I know that if this was a white neighborhood, they would be smooth.”⁶⁵

In addition to challenges with the framework of abolition, many parents felt locked out of exploring abolition by the same barriers that lock parents out of power in the movement. Parents experienced abolition as a framework that seemed to have rights and wrongs decided on by academics, leaving parents feeling that they were being told to think like and take orders from professionals who think they know more about parents and their communities than parents do. Much of the language also felt out of reach (“systemic oppression,” “divestment,” “addressing harm”). As Genevieve wrote:

I hear parents struggling with abolition as a “foreign” idea that has come from other people, not parents impacted: “I get it but sometimes I need more knowledge of it in order to get a better idea.” “Sitting and reading this article is like not knowing the language.” “You can read it and read it and read it, but will I understand it? No.”⁶⁶

For Rise, the commitment has been to make sure parents are being held and supported wherever they are. In an all-staff abolition retreat and in weekly groups to write this Piece, we clarified together that abolition is a framework that has come from people impacted by policing and prisons, not just academics, and has come from their experience of how systems retrench and can even grow stronger through “reformist” reforms. We broke down complex phrases like “systemic oppression” in terms of the lived reality they represent, and explored how calls to burn the system down can seem to replicate a cycle of control, retaliation, and punishment enacted by the system itself. Jeanette wrote: “Parents have been attacked by child

⁶² Imani Worthy, *supra* note 16.

⁶³ Ashanti Bryant, *supra* note 23.

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ Teresa Bachiller, *supra* note 24.

⁶⁶ Genevieve Saavedra Dalton Parker, Development Director, Rise, in New York, N.Y. (2021).

welfare for years. When I hear abolition and think of attacking the system, it feels like I will replicate the same harm and hurt.”⁶⁷ The abolition retreat offered a reflective and loving space to work through fears and desires, to honor that a lot of parents at Rise want to resist and heal from all levels of internalized, interpersonal, and structural oppression, and to build the changes we want to see.

It was the most important to recognize that abolition is not a prescription or demand but a framework for action. A platform for political action still needs to be envisioned and led by parents. Abolition is a framework but movements applying it to *how* we move toward an equitable, healing, and just society for parents are where parents’ expertise can never be replaced. Jeanette wrote:

Parents need a baseline of abolition principles and strategies, not strong perspectives of what it needs to be or look like. We need things we can read and ways to understand what’s hard to understand about abolition, so we can make up our own ideas of the movement. Parents needs to explore their own feelings about what the movement means to them—what makes you feel proud to speak about in this abolition framework.⁶⁸

We also heard the need for community education and consciousness raising to work through a collective vision with many more parents. Imani wrote:

People still trust the system, because the media sensationalizes child deaths and because of NYC’s excellent advertising, which the system uses to literally put a flyer up anywhere. Waiting for the bus, on the subway, when you enter some government buildings, you will see that infamous sign “Protect NYC Children.” Our government hypes it up, so it is up to us, the impacted people, to hype up public awareness of the harms of family policing. We need social advocacy to awaken and empower the people who have been affected and allies to build power.⁶⁹

Our own team benefited most from learning from people we trust. As staff members including Keyna, Imani, Halimah, Bianca, and Genevieve brought their understandings into our discussions, abolition began to seem more approachable. Through conversations and interviews, our team found credibility in those working at grassroots organizations using practices of mutual aid, restorative and transformative justice, credible messenger mentoring and peer support. Seeing how these organizations rely on relationships and networks to amplify the capacities communities already have has made it easier to see how abolition’s vision can be practical and tangible to tackle. That helped our staff recognize how aspects of our organizational culture already embody abolitionist principles and can become community practices. Just as peer support approaches knit

⁶⁷ Jeanette Vega Brown, *supra* note 10.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ Imani Worthy, *supra* note 16.

our Rise team together, they can be powerful tools for building community with parents beyond Rise.

The result of this deep process of exploration is Rise's launch of two abolitionist programs. First, Rise launched a network of trained parent peer supporters who work to interrupt cycles of family crisis and system intervention by providing information, resources, and support to parents in New York City's most impacted communities. Rise's parent-led peer team developed a report and model of peer and community care to support safe, thriving families and to prevent involvement with the family policing system.⁷⁰ The team is now building the necessary infrastructure to begin training peer supporters in 2022. Second, we launched a community education initiative for mobilizing around a Parents' Platform that reflects the political vision of parents impacted. The parent-led community organizing team developed a participatory action research report documenting parents' experiences with the family policing system and exploring a collective vision to transform our society's structures, policies, and practices related to family and community support.⁷¹ It includes concrete recommendations that can serve as stepping stones toward abolition.⁷² Our organizing team is now developing a Parents' Platform to advocate for investments that will improve community conditions, reduce family policing, and build new approaches to preventing and addressing harm.

Rise is building relationships and visioning with allies, parents, and community members and groups about how to both build a robust peer support network in New York City and develop policies that move us closer to abolition. Paradoxically, envisioning and building abolitionist actions have been easier than working through abolition as a concept. As Teresa M. put it, "I don't think about the politics of the work, I work from passion and action. I like to be part of the actions that make change that I want to see."⁷³ Jeanette wrote:

I see abolition as creating the new world and networks of community support that families need. Abolishing family policing is not about changing the system's culture or helping them be nicer, it's about ending racism against Black and brown families, stopping the targeting and surveillance of our communities and bringing and developing a new system of support within communities. Abolishing the system, for me, is reimagining the community I want to live in.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Rise Peer Vision Team, *Someone to Turn to: A Vision for Creating Networks of Parent Peer Care*, RISE INSIGHTS (2021), https://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Rise_PeerCareInsights2021_Final.pdf [<https://perma.cc/MD3A-NUQV>].

⁷¹ Naashia B. et al., Rise Participatory Action Rsch. Project & Takeroot Just., *An Unavoidable System: The Harms of Family Policing and Parents' Vision for Investing in Community Care*, RISE (2021), <https://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AnUnavoidableSystem.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/9GG8-4KUG>].

⁷² *Id.* at 22–28.

⁷³ Teresa Marrero, *supra* note 28.

⁷⁴ Jeanette Vega Brown, *supra* note 10.

VI. CENTERING PARENTS IN THE MOVEMENT

The movement to abolish family policing is growing.⁷⁵ Yet while a dense ecosystem of organizations nationwide is dedicated to ending mass incarceration and abolishing prisons, our own movement is in an early season, just extending its roots and growing shoots. And, just as Rise is in process with parents, we are sharing this Piece to be in process with our wider organizing community. Parents need to be in all spaces. That can and must become a reality.

We recognize that few people and organizations are entirely dedicated to movement work, and that doing this work on the fly can make it difficult to do the work inclusively. The pressure to move fast conflicts with the importance of moving with intention, and the practices described here take resources, especially the resource of time. Rise, too, lived in survival mode during years of working in a closet on an annual budget of less than \$85,000 and then as we whipsawed through a period of rapid growth. It became easier to make space to work through conflicts and complexity when we had access to resources for facilitated group reflection, investment in staff skills-building, and even a physical office space that supported conversation. At a basic level, our team also felt the mental space to do the individual learning and exploring that propels innovation when there were practical reasons to feel secure in their jobs and Rise itself.

Yet shifting the power dynamics of this movement must be everyone's goal. As more impacted people, organizations, allies, and funders are recognizing the need for a robust movement to end family policing, active steps to center parents' power and expertise must be our stepping stones forward. The broad dynamics will shift with every small footfall. As parents come into a training, coalition, or task force facilitated and convened by parents, they will learn from other parents impacted. The language used will be chosen by and for them. Group norms will center their comfort. The power to invest in and center parents will be held by parents themselves. Parents will set the agenda. Allies will, increasingly, be allies. That is how parent power builds.

To begin that cycle of shifting power, our growing movement must reckon with the dynamics that tokenize and marginalize parents. It must value the practices and investments that center parents. It must slow down to do the hard work of building a sustainable movement through parent-led consciousness raising. Halimah said:

Immediate results are unrealistic expectations when talking about people's liberation. It's up to us as people and a community to learn about what restorative justice, transformative justice and healing justice are. We tell ourselves we don't have the time to do that work, but we have time to take away people's freedom, humanity and

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Michael Fitzgerald, *Rising Voices For 'Family Power' Seek to Abolish The Child Welfare System*, IMPRINT (July 8, 2020), <https://imprintnews.org/child-welfare-2/family-power-seeks-abolish-cps-child-welfare/45141> [https://perma.cc/N5CF-PA24] (reporting on the voices that are "coalescing" into a movement).

connection. If we have time to do that, we have the time to do things differently.⁷⁶

We must also look to parents who already are, and have been, leading this movement and putting abolitionist principles into practice throughout the country and even around the world. Parents impacted by the system are developing legislation to support and protect families,⁷⁷ and holding public office (like U.S. Representative Gwen Moore of Wisconsin).⁷⁸ They are working on research to document the harms of the system in Australia; protesting outside of family court in England; and building community, providing peer support, offering child care and sharing resources and information for advocacy in Canada.⁷⁹ While not all this work is explicitly termed abolitionist, parents impacted by the system are strategizing and advocating to reduce the power and harm of the system, and raising up solutions that exist outside of it, including by providing care and support to each other.

Parents bring the passion and commitment that form the foundation for mobilizing for justice. Bianca wrote: “Allies can never match what parents bring to the fight against a system that has caused you, your family, and your community deep harm.”⁸⁰ As Jeanette put it, “This movement for change is part of our souls.”⁸¹ Imani wrote:

Going through what I went through with the family policing system, I had to really, really believe and advocate for myself during that time or else I would have lost my son. The threat of losing him gave me superpowers. It is what motivates me to fight to dismantle this system, to advocate for my people and my community.⁸²

That said, Imani added, “I feel like I’ve spent my whole life trying to convince people to see my humanity.”⁸³ As we fight a system that strips parents of power, dignity, and humanity, it is our responsibility to ourselves and to each other to not replicate oppressive system dynamics that hurt us while we rebuild together.

⁷⁶ Halimah Washington, *supra* note 20.

⁷⁷ See, e.g., Nora McCarthy, *New York’s Child Welfare Laws Will Advance Justice*, APPEAL (Nov. 13, 2019), <https://theappeal.org/new-yorks-child-welfare-laws-will-advance-justice/> [<https://perma.cc/5QH6-GRKA>].

⁷⁸ *Id.* (“U.S. Representative Gwen Moore of Milwaukee . . . spoke on the U.S. House floor about her own experience, at age 18, of being separated from her daughter because of poverty”); Press Release, Gwen Moore, House of Representatives, Congresswoman Gwen Moore Introduces Poverty Is Not Child Neglect Act (Jan. 28, 2021), <https://gwenmoore.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=4711> [<https://perma.cc/9MD6-QU5D>].

⁷⁹ Int’l Parent Advoc. Network & Rise, *Toolkit for Transformation*, INT’L PARENT ADVOC. NETWORK, <https://toolkit.parentadvocacy.net/> [<https://perma.cc/HH26-BVPT>] (presenting research on the work of parents impacted in countries where “the child welfare parent advocacy movement has begun to gain a foothold”).

⁸⁰ Bianca Shaw, *supra* note 43.

⁸¹ Jeanette Vega Brown, *supra* note 10.

⁸² Imani Worthy, *supra* note 16.

⁸³ *Id.*