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Finally, A Collaborative Program That Really Helps Desperate Parents

Helen Ubiñas
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Not a day goes by that I don't hear about some truly worthy social program — for the poor, the homeless, the sick — struggling to maintain funding, or more often, in danger of being cut altogether.

It's a pathetic irony of this economy: When vulnerable people need services the most, it's those services that are first on the chopping block.

So when I got an e-mail from the Department of Children and Families about a new state program designed to increase the chances of reuniting families separated because of parents' substance abuse, I assumed I knew where it was headed.

Great idea. Probably in need of funds. Yeah, good luck with that.

Helen Ubiñas E-mail

But not only was this collaboration involving the DCF, the state's judicial branch and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services actually a go, they were using money they already had to make it happen.

How's that for creativity in tough times?

When Sharone Hamer and I recently spoke, it was clear that fighting for custody of her children while she struggled with drug addiction had hindered her recovery.

There were moments in court, Hamer recalled, when she wasn't sure what rights she had — or if she had any. She often felt so defeated and alone that she'd turn to the very drugs that led to the removal of her children.

After each heartbreaking account of losing her kids, I found myself asking Hamer the same thing: So, was that the last time?

I asked once, then twice, then so many times I wondered if maybe I'd misunderstood the person who told me she was a success story.

Hamer would stay clean for a while, promise herself it would be the last time, then she'd start doing drugs and lose her children again.

After more than a decade of drug use, she was desperate to reclaim her life. But more often than not, her addiction would pull her back to the drugs she started taking in her 20s, back to the darkness from which she'd resurface only long enough to watch her children at their preschool from a nearby car.

"It was the only way I could see them," she said. "I didn't want them to see me all messed up."

The last time Hamer kicked drugs, she says, she did it for good. But, she admits, without the recovery specialist who helped her navigate the complicated system, she's sure it would have been more difficult.

Hamer was on the team that designed the voluntary program for parents who are in Juvenile Court faced with the prospect of losing their children. The idea is to catch troubled parents early and streamline the process by having all three agencies involved.

Those who enter the program are immediately assigned a recovery specialist who, in addition to administering drug tests, monitors attendance in treatment and support groups. The program just started in New Britain and will begin in June in Bridgeport and Willimantic.

"I know what it's like to feel alone," Hamer said. "I just want to help other parents and show them that even if they're lost and scared and hopeless, they shouldn't give up."

Hamer, who lives in Waterbury with her husband and works for an ambulance company, has been clean for nearly two years now. She has full custody of two of her four children. The other two visit every weekend, but, she says proudly, she speaks to them every day.

A few weeks ago, Hamer received a letter from the department of mental health. She rummaged around to find it before she left for work Wednesday, but couldn't. So, she paraphrased it. It congratulated her, she said. She no longer needed the agency's services. Success.

Helen Ubiñas' column appears on Thursdays and Sundays. Read her blog at courant.com/helen.