

Parents at the Table: The National Home Visiting Network Welcomes Parent Leaders and Benefits From Their Perspectives

**National Home Visiting Network
Network Principles in Action**

AUGUST 2023

Introduction

The National Home Visiting Network (Network) was formed in 2017 to inspire the growth of a well-networked field to ensure the benefits of home visiting could be realized by all families. Early efforts focused on breaking down silos between home visiting research, policy, and practice. But parent voice was missing. Eventually, the Advisory Committee of the Network mustered the courage to onboard three parents so that those who were enrolled in home visiting programs could help shape the future directions. This article explains how the parents were recruited, onboarded, and supported so that they could fully participate. It shares the contributions they made, and what participation has meant to them and the home visiting field. The approach and lessons can be instructive for all boards and committees that seek meaningful, authentic input from those with lived experience to help shape programs, policy, and research.

This brief shares the story of how the Network brought parents into the Network's Advisory Committee. It offers a frank review of what held us back and what pushed us forward. It shares our intent and how we support parents so that they can fully participate. It also provides a candid assessment of our efforts to ready the Advisory Committee table to receive parents and include them as equal partners, not token participants. Voices of our current parent leaders—Regine Cherry, Nicole Loveless, and Jennifer Vincent—will be shared. The steps we took—and continue to take—to achieve meaningful parent engagement will be highlighted.

“I was a parent leader before I was even a parent! I helped the youth at my church and was a cheerleading coach, too. Not only did I support the kids as they were growing up, but I was also able to support their parents who I saw were struggling and needed encouragement to practice patience and to understand their child. I was gifted with my son five years ago. My nurse home visitor encouraged me to speak out about my postpartum depression and to help other parents realize they were not alone. That led to the nurse suggesting that I become part of my Local Leader Group that helped shape home visiting programs in my community. And that led to my being invited to serve on the Michigan statewide home visiting group and now the National Home Visiting Network.”

–Regine Cherry

“I’ve never been one to stand by and watch—I feel responsible and put my hands in to help. This started when I was young and needed to care for my mom and sister, and now with my husband and five children. I’ve also never been afraid to be vocal about things that others may overlook. But I realize that I’m better at caring and advocating for others than for myself. And that is changing! Today, because of my connections to home visiting and leadership opportunities, I am more confident. I see myself as ‘Nicole,’ not just as a poop cleaner-upper, mom, and wife. I am Nicole, and I can be at the top of my list. Not only does this help me, but it also helps my children and my marriage because they see my love, commitment, and strength.”

–Nicole Loveless

“My youngest son was born with many health challenges, and I’ve needed to be his advocate. Sometimes it feels like an uphill battle, but I can’t give up. Fortunately, my home visitor helped me to know what services I should expect to receive and how to effectively advocate. She gave me a lot of positive reinforcement and validation. During one of his hospital stays, I observed a family who didn’t speak English and was not receiving the care they should have for their daughter. I could see it. I could see the inequities, the injustice. It wasn’t right. As parents, we need to be empowered to speak up for our children because they can’t advocate for themselves. And when we come across other parents that may not know how to advocate or what to ask for, we need to step in and help them.”

–Jennifer Vincent

Background

Including those with lived experience in all levels of decision-making opens the window to understanding root causes of adversity and prosperity. Further, it helps to align policy and programs with what families say they most need. But it takes time to shift mindsets and deeply rooted practices from doing for families to sharing power and co-creating with them. It takes trusting relationships and respect to honor parents and respond to their truths.

It is time that those of us working in human services—child care, home visiting, job training, economic assistance, public housing, community development, and related fields—recognize that our best intentions are not always in sync with what families most need and want. As program administrators and practitioners, we are trained at university to “know best” because we understand the research and implement evidence-based programs with fidelity. Or we implement programs that represent our best ideas. But how can we really know what is best if we do not share the same lived experience with those we are attempting to serve?

“At first, it felt like jumping onto a moving train. However, the people on the train were helping us get on – not just watching us struggle. They helped us get on, settle in, and understand what was going on. They encouraged us to share our truth. It felt good to have an open, supportive, safe space to talk about things that are personal.”

–Nicole Loveless

A Note About Terminology— Parent Leaders

Throughout the document, as we talk about “parent leaders,” we are referring to parents (or other primary caregivers) of young children who are enrolled or recently enrolled in home visiting programs. Parent leaders are willing to share their experiences to ensure policy, practice, and research are guided by the lived experiences of today’s families and the real opportunities and challenges that they face.

Fortunately, the concept of parent leadership and voice is beginning to take hold across the human services field. It is sparked by growing understanding of systemic racism and its impact on differential outcomes tied to race, class, economics, and other factors.

Family engagement was a central component of the 1960s Head Start program in the United States—a federal-to-local investment supporting children ages three to five and their parents. As a national laboratory, Head Start, and now Early Head Start which serves expecting families and those with infants and toddlers, continue to refine family engagement practices. These programs provide a beacon for others seeking to develop meaningful partnerships with families.

The special education community was also an early adopter of family engagement. It led the way, especially within K-12 education, for illuminating the need for partnership between parents and educators to build individualized education plans to support children in reaching their unique potential. Family engagement practices have been shown to be important for parents experiencing economic insecurity and those who have children that are dual language learners.

From these examples, we learn that family engagement takes many forms and needs to be tailored for each family to accommodate their interests, expertise, and availability. At a minimum, this may look like satisfaction surveys, which are widely recognized as woefully inadequate if the only form of engagement. More active forms of engagement include regular parent-staff communication for sharing, goal setting and feedback, focus groups, and parent advisory committees. Higher levels of engagement are where programs

include parent leaders in the co-creation of policies and practices. In these instances, parent leaders are part of the interview team for hiring executives and staff, help set program budgets, have a voice in determining metrics for outcome evaluations, inform program options, and much more.

Simply put, parent leadership and voice should drive the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs, the design and advocacy of policy, and the accountability of policymakers. Administrators who are dipping a toe into family engagement routinely acknowledge that this work takes time and resources. Time is needed to build relationships and genuinely listen and learn from parents. Resources are needed to pay parents for their time and expertise, and to provide them the support that enables their fullest participation.

A Note About Terminology— Family Engagement

According to the [Head Start Parent Family and Community Engagement Framework](#), “Family engagement is a collaborative and strengths-based process through which early childhood professionals, families, and children build positive and goal-oriented relationships. It is a shared responsibility of families and staff at all levels that requires mutual respect for the roles and strengths each has to offer. Family engagement focuses on culturally and linguistically responsive relationship-building with key family members in a child’s life. These people include pregnant women and expectant families, mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other adult caregivers. It requires making a commitment to creating and sustaining an ongoing partnership that supports family well-being. It also honors and supports the parent-child relationships that are central to a child’s healthy development, school readiness, and well-being.”

The National Home Visiting Network

The Network was formed in 2017 to inspire the growth of a well-connected field that catalyzes and magnifies the collective reach and effectiveness of early childhood home visiting in the United States. Prior to the formation of the network, there was important work happening to advance home visiting, but that work often represented individual acts of stakeholders, not a cross-silo approach to weaving practice, policy, and research. The Network was created to do just that. It is not an organization; it is a space for learning, sharing, linking, and aligning efforts.

The Network includes representatives of other networks in the home visiting space.¹

The Network is guided by a set of principles developed by network scientist Jane Wei-Skillern, Ph.D.² These include:

- **Mission, not organization.** As leaders, we adopt strategies and tactics to achieve our overall mission, not necessarily to stimulate the growth of any one organization or domain.
- **Trust, not control.** Trust and shared values guide how we interact and create an environment that maximizes our collective impact.
- **Build constellations, not stars.** As partners, we see each of our organizations as part of a larger web of activity targeting our cause, not as a hub of isolated action.
- **Promote others, not yourself.** Our organizations work alongside our peers as equals and are willing to take a back seat when other practitioners are in a better position to lead.

It is with these principles in mind that the Network established as its guiding star the goal of expanding the reach of home visiting benefits to all families. Network Advisors recognize that no one organization can achieve this goal; it will take all of us working together and embodying these principles in our work to succeed.

The Network's Advisory Committee started without parents at the table, yet parents are precisely whom home visiting initiatives seek to impact. All of us knew that was not where we wanted to be, but it was what we were accustomed to. We understood the research about the benefits to children,

¹ Representatives include members from the following organizations: Alliance for Early Success, Association for State and Tribal Home Visiting Initiatives, Center for the Study of Social Policy, Education Development Center, First Five, Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative, National Alliance of Home Visiting Models, National Home Visiting Coalition, National Home Visiting Resource Center, Start Early/National Home Visiting Summit, ZERO TO THREE, and several representatives from federal government agencies and others.

² Wei-Skillern, J., & Silver, N. (2013). Four network principles for collaboration success. *The Foundation Review*, 5(1), <https://haas.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/FoundationReview.pdf>; Hsiao, R., & Wei-Skillern, J. (2022). Opening up educational opportunities through network leadership. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. <https://doi.org/10.48558/SN5K-VD57>

families, and programs of family engagement and still it felt like an enormous and scary step to share power and co-create with parents. What if parents were not satisfied with the evidence-based home visiting models that research told us were effective? What if parents wanted home visiting programs to extend beyond the early childhood years but most of the models are limited to prenatal to age five? What if parents wanted home visits *and* better connection to other basic supports like housing, employment, child care? What if parents had different definitions of success and different ways for measuring this? While the field attempts to be nimble, the growing insistence on implementing models that meet the highest level of evidence and rigorously stick to a prescribed curriculum can diminish the ability to adapt to accommodate unique family and community needs. It felt scary to open our work up, and we knew that it was essential to do so.

We took an easy first step and invited parent leadership expert, Bryn Fortune, to join the Network's Advisory Committee. Fortune was a representative from the Early Childhood Investment Corporation in Michigan who was responsible for working with families and agencies to ensure parent voices were part of local and state decision-making for child and family services. Fortune challenged us to do more. At the time, we were also engaged in a deep learning journey around racial equity. As part of our learning, we were regularly reminded of the fact that addressing inequities—especially structural racism—demanded that those with lived experience be involved in crafting antiracist approaches that could re-imagine the home visiting field. There was simply no way that we could understand the depth and breadth of racial inequities in home visiting without including home visiting consumers in our work. Further, we held a virtual convening to learn from a few organizations about how centering parent voice is a means to advance equity, and we included parents and providers in that discussion. Combined, these activities gave us the courage to bring parents to the table.

In 2021, the Advisory Committee committed to expanding its membership to include three parents who were currently enrolled in home visiting programs.

Exploring Models for Engaging Parent Leaders

Fortunately, we were able to look at and learn from other examples of local, state, and national efforts that engage parents as leaders:

- The state of Michigan has been including parent leaders in the development of program and policy at the local and state levels for nearly three decades. This work was first tied to special education and now includes home visiting and related programs. The report [Stepping Up and Stepping Out](#) shares helpful learnings from Michigan. In particular, Michigan's Parent Leadership and Voice Continuum provides a helpful reminder of how parent leaders become change agents to impact decisions.

MICHIGAN'S PARENT VOICE AND LEADERSHIP CONTINUUM

How Parent Leaders Become Change Agents to Impact Decisions

| INVOLVEMENT | ENGAGEMENT | EMPOWERMENT | LEADERSHIP |
|--|--|--|--|
| Parents are enrolled and participate | Parent voice informs | Parent partners collaborate in planning and implementation | Parent leaders are integral decision-makers |
| The system designs all policies, programs and evaluation tools for parent participants | The system learns from parent voice through surveys, focus groups and interviews | The system changes approach with parent partners | The system designs policies, programs and evaluation tools with parent leaders |

- [Community Organizing and Family Issues](#) was established in 1995 to help parents recognize and exercise their natural leadership to create change for themselves, their families, and the larger systems that affect families in their communities.
- The [National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement](#) (NAFSCE) is a membership organization for practitioners, educators, school administrators, researchers, and advocates who are committed to advancing high-impact policies and practices for family, school, and community engagement to promote child development and improve student achievement. NAFSCE began as an official organization in 2014 and was committed from the start to include stakeholders in shaping the strategic plan and weighing in on key decisions. By 2019, NAFSCE created a Parent and Family Leaders Council that is nine parents strong. Three representatives of the Council serve on the NAFSCE Board of Directors. One parent representative serves on the Executive Committee of the Board. Multiple parents serve on special committees focused on strategic planning, workforce competencies, and policy. Parent representation at each level of decision-making helps to ensure that parent voice is included in all aspects of the organization.

Taking cues from these and other efforts, we crafted our approach to family engagement for the Network. We knew that it would change over time, especially as we built relationships with the parent leaders. We would need to be nimble and adjust the approach so that their participation would benefit the Network's Advisory Committee and the parents as well.

The Network Commits to Including Parent Leaders

Our racial equity learning journey taught us the importance of centering those with lived experience in our work. We engaged in a two-year deep dive to better understand racial inequities including structural racism. We learned how to communicate in ways that diminish unintended racism. And we assumed responsibility for applying a racial equity lens when developing (and re-envisioning) policies, programs, research, and evaluation. One Advisory Committee member opined:

I thought I knew a lot, and I didn't know a lot at all. Just being a woman, a black woman, or someone of color doesn't make you an expert. As we went through the back mapping and saw the root causes of inequities, not just for people of color but for a lot of other people, we realized a system that doesn't work for so many people doesn't work for anyone. –Karen Howard

We had long said it was important to include parent voice in our work. It's one thing to say this is important and another thing to act on it. The racial equity learning journey gave us the push to say, 'no more excuses' and to find ways to authentically engage parent voice in all we do.

We revisited with the full Advisory Committee our expectations of participation—what they give and what they get. And then we thought about what might need to be different for parent leaders who would be joining the Advisory Committee as individuals rather than representatives of organizations.

Much would be the same. We all commit to:

- Embodying the four network principles in our work with one another
- Prioritizing full participation in Advisory Committee meetings, both monthly meetings and occasional in-person meetings
- Participating in workgroups and subcommittees
- Engaging in open, transparent communication, assuming positive intent, and appreciating that everyone has the freedom to disagree

And a few things would need to be different to support the full participation of parent leaders:

- **Compensation.** Parents would need to be paid for their time (and reimbursed for child care) when they attended meetings, just as other members of the Advisory Committee are paid by their organizations for their time.

- **Orientation.** Time would need to be spent upfront with parents to ensure they had ample opportunity to learn about the Network and its Advisory Committee. They needed to be able to ask questions so that they could join the meetings with a basic level of understanding (e.g., the goals of the Network, the background of those on the Advisory Committee, the issues the Advisory Committee is grappling with).
- **Ongoing preparation.** We learned from Michigan's efforts to engage parent leaders that it is important to provide regular time each month in advance of Advisory Committee meetings for parent leaders to come together. During that time, they review the upcoming meeting agenda and prepare for the discussion.
- **Regular time to debrief.** Following each monthly Advisory Committee meeting, we have time for parent leaders to come together to debrief. This is a chance for them to reflect on the conversation, and to ask questions that they may not have thought of (or been comfortable raising) in the full meeting.
- **Professional /leadership development.** We believed it would be important to offer support to parents for their professional and leadership development. This would need to be tailored for each parent and would be the least we could do in exchange for the richness of their contributions to our work.
- **Mentor program.** We thought it would be helpful to offer a mentor program. Parent leaders were able to choose their own mentor from among the Advisory Committee members. The mentor and parent leader have regular monthly meetings to build relationships. This gives the parents another person they can connect with who could help de-code and influence the work.
- **Point-person on the network facilitation team.** We felt that there should be a point person on the facilitation team who would be available to the parent leaders and help to make sure all the above meetings and supports were implemented or modified based on what the parents said they needed.

“I like the fact that we feel very prepared before each meeting.”

–Jennifer Vincent

“Because of the preparation, it feels like we now know what we are talking about and how we can best contribute. If we don’t understand something, we can have it addressed right away without it feeling condescending.”

–Nicole Loveless

“I appreciate the safe space. We come together and are encouraged to share our perspectives... The compensation made me take my role seriously. I was more likely to show up, be prepared, learn, and contribute. It put the onus on me to do more.”

–Regine Cherry

“The mentor relationship has been invaluable. I like that we can just have a conversation and maybe say things that I was not able to say in the larger meeting because there are so many people there. A lot of times I say things to my mentor, and she says, ‘Oh that is a good point...or I didn’t think of it that way.’”

–Jennifer Vincent

“My mentor is like a big sister. I cherish our relationship. She encourages me to grow personally and professionally.”

–Regine Cherry

“She is amazing! We have informal texts to just check in and more formal opportunities to talk. She offers important moral support.”

–Nicole Loveless

We realized that the onus should not just fall on the parent leaders coming up to speed with and fitting into the Advisory Committee. The members of the Advisory Committee also needed to make an effort to welcome and engage the parents and adjust their practices. Many of the Advisory Committee members had long-standing personal and professional relationships with one another. They needed to be aware of how this affected the dynamics of the group. Talking in acronyms and interrupting one another might be acceptable with their long-time colleagues, but it was not going to contribute to a welcoming environment for parents.

The Network facilitators met with the Advisory Committee members and outlined approaches to engagement that they would all adopt to attempt to make the meetings more accessible for parent leaders. These changes included:

- **How we introduce ourselves.** We would need to share what brought us to the field of home visiting (our motivations and interests), rather than our titles, organizations, and degrees.
- **How we build personal relationships.** We would need to spend more time in small groups during each meeting so that we could get to know one another better and build connections and relationships. Creative ice-breaker questions were used for this.
- **How we set meeting agendas and prepare to implement them.** In building the meeting agendas, we would need to think about the relevance of the topic for all participants. It would be important to make sure that topics of particular importance to parents are addressed. In addition, we would need to encourage whomever is presenting a topic during the meeting to ensure every member of the Advisory Committee can engage.

- **How we use terminology.** We would need to commit to using plain language, rather than acronyms that would not be understood by all. Advisory Committee member Sarah Walzer notes that, “The secret truth is that this likely has been helpful for many people in the room because some might have been too embarrassed to ask.”

“It was very intimidating at first because we didn’t know what to expect. Initially, we had a hard time understanding the language. But we corrected that early on. Everyone was willing to help.”

–Jennifer Vincent

- **How we pose questions to the group and respond.** We would need to get into the habit of posing a question, then pausing to give all participants time to gather their thoughts before responding. When responding, we would need to be sure to not talk over one another.

On recruitment, the Advisory Committee reached out through its members to share word of the opportunity for parents to participate. About ten applications were sent in and the facilitators screened the applications and resumes and selected parents who could represent diverse backgrounds, home visiting models, and geography. While this approach worked for recruiting the first round of parent leaders, current parent leaders suggest that in the future it would be beneficial for another parent to be part of the recruitment process.

In the early days of the Network, the Advisory Committee came together for in-person meetings two to three times a year. Those opportunities were important for building relationships. In-person meetings were paused because of COVID-19. While we did our best to design the monthly virtual meetings to be as engaging as possible, we recognized that this posed a disadvantage for relationship-building with new Advisory Committee members.

In September 2022, we came together for our first in-person meeting since the COVID-19 outbreak. We took care to design the meeting so that participants could join safely, and we built in opportunities for relationship-building to accelerate for all Advisory Committee members. We knew this was essential for re-establishing trust and a commitment to listening, learning, and collaborating with one another.

Parent leaders arrived in Washington, DC, a day early for a pre-meeting that focused on parent leadership development, time with their mentor, a visit to Capitol Hill to influence legislative staff, and time to prepare for full immersion with the rest of the Advisory Committee.

Parent leaders fully participated in the meeting and offered contributions that helped the Advisory Committee to see inequities and structural racism through their eyes. They spoke their truth as they told legislative staff about the limited reach of federal home visiting investments. Nicole spoke her truth when a site visit to the National Museum of the American Indian illuminated that museum

exhibits did not accurately reflect her tribal community and its history. And they spoke their truth when they challenged those gathered to let parents lead on advocacy rather than be “puppets” for messages crafted by others. The diversity of thoughts and experiences shared during the meeting created a richness to the conversation that was unique, enlightening, and welcomed by all.

Parent Voices Are Shaping the Home Visiting Field

Jennifer, Regine, and Nicole are providing a necessary voice of reason grounded in lived experience as home visiting participants to shape discussions within the Advisory Committee. They are making valuable suggestions related to home visiting policy and practice. And their involvement is influencing how others at the table are re-imagining their own work to include the voices of parent leaders.

Weighing in on policy considerations

In the normal course of the Advisory Committee’s conversations, there have been multiple times when the parent leaders have raised questions, made observations, or offered suggestions based on their parenting and home visiting experiences. For

example, Nicole reminds the committee that parenting support is a universal need and programs should not have income eligibility requirements. She wisely notes that if all parents were participating in home visiting and it was seen as a universal support rather than a “poverty” program, we would have more advocates calling for continued funding and expansion of federal and state programs. Similarly, Jennifer reminds the committee that parenting support should not be limited to the early childhood years. She suggests that home visiting can be a valuable service during the school-age years as well. Regine makes the point that in the time of COVID, we learned that parents want flexibility to determine if they are most comfortable with in-person or virtual home visits. Because of this, consideration should be given to altering policy definitions that might take a more expansive meaning of “home” visits. And all parent leaders highlight the benefits they have enjoyed due to enrollment in home visiting programs and that advocates should prioritize expansion of federal, state, and local funding to serve more families.

“Just because your child turns a certain age doesn’t mean you have everything figured out and don’t need help.”

–Jennifer Vincent

Weighing in on practice considerations

The parent leaders have made several key contributions related to home visiting practice. First, another member of the Advisory Committee who is involved with home visiting evaluation wondered which made more of a difference for family participation and retention: how home visitors build relationship with families or careful matching based on characteristics (e.g., race, religion,

geography) of home visitors to families. Regine took this question back to her Local Leader Group in Michigan to gather feedback and reported back that her colleagues believe it is the process of engagement that is more important. Jennifer, speaking from her own experience, was adamant that there is real value to diversity, and careful matching could mean that she would not have the opportunity to learn from a home visitor who might share a different perspective or worldview.

Also, with respect to practice considerations, all three parent leaders spoke about the importance of home visitors being knowledgeable about resources in the community and being able to make connections or referrals. They said that a home visitor who has developed a trusting relationship with the parent can play a valuable role in connecting parents to resources that they might otherwise not know about or be too hesitant to access on their own. While this is included as an expectation of the federal home visiting program, and all of those sitting at the Advisory Committee table assumed it was happening, the reality check that the parents provided highlighted the fact that connections to other services and referrals is a practice that is sometimes falling short.

“I joined because I wanted to give back. I saw this as a way to develop my leadership skills and contribute to shaping the home visiting field.”

–Regine Cherry

In the spring of 2022, the parent leaders were invited to pick a topic of interest to them and lead a discussion during a monthly Advisory Committee meeting. The parent leaders quickly landed on the topic of peer-to-peer support. Nicole shared that parents need opportunities to safely vent about their parenting frustrations without worrying that others will judge them. She shared an experience she observed of a mother who had been holding so much in that it was unhealthy when she finally spoke up. Jennifer shared that in her community, a parent group that she was connected to at the hospital provided some support, and that more opportunities like this would be helpful. Regine talked about models of support from the recovery community, in which individuals can safely share without judgment and where a table of resources can be available for helping direct people to supports. While home visiting programs often have a parent or group socialization component, the parent leaders felt that was not enough and that programs should help to create a safe space for more authentic peer-to-peer support.

In 2023, the Advisory Committee formed a small workgroup to discuss the home visiting workforce, and both Regine and Nicole volunteered to be part of the monthly meetings. The Network’s [Call to Action to Advance Racial Equity in Home Visiting](#) specifically named the workforce as one of three key areas where work was needed to grow a more diverse pipeline of home visiting staff and administrators who are familiar with inequity and structural racism and committed to shepherding change. And recent reports from the Administration for Children and Families, including [Home Visitor Professional Well-Being: What It Is and Why It Matters](#), carried a similar theme and presented an

opening for gathering experiences and stories from those with lived experience as home visitors. Both Regine and Nicole actively participated in the workgroup conversations to determine what value add the Network could offer the field related to home visitor well-being, who to interview to gather stories of home visitors, and what to ask. For Regine, insights were informed by her many years as a home visiting recipient; this was true for Nicole as well, plus Nicole once considered a career in home visiting. Regine and Nicole will play a role in helping gather stories, analyzing them, developing recommendations, and sharing the stories out via a report for the field.

Influencing how others at the Network table are re-imagining their work to include parent voice

The experience of having Jennifer, Regine, and Nicole at the Network table has helped other members of the Network double down on their attempts to include parent voice in their respective efforts. For example, Advisory Committee members representing home visiting research and evaluation are exploring methods—such as participatory action research—for engaging those who would be affected by the research in the design of studies.

Advisory Committee members representing home visiting policy and advocacy are finding ways to meaningfully engage parents as well. Strolling Thunder (organized by ZERO TO THREE) creatively mobilizes parents to demonstrate support for early childhood policy at state capitol buildings and the U.S. Capitol. These demonstrations are matched with parent lobbying visits to the offices of elected officials. In 2022, the National Home Visiting Summit (organized by Start Early) began placing an emphasis on parents as members of the Summit community. Parents were encouraged to engage in the Summit as leaders, presenters, and attendees and were offered stipends and child care for their participation. Summit workshops and plenary sessions have an intentional focus on parent engagement, with the session proposal process requiring submitters to identify how parent and provider voice will be incorporated into their sessions. The 2023 Summit planning committee explored the possibility of inviting parent representatives to join the steering committee. It determined that readiness and preparation could not be underestimated, and therefore made the decision to postpone the invitation to build processes that will provide the best opportunities for successful onboarding of parent leaders. Start Early continues its diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging journey by strengthening its Family Voice Strategy in 2023. Recommendations from this work will help guide future Summit planning.

The practice community is adapting, too, to engage parents in all dimensions of programs. The home visiting national model ParentChild+ is working to incorporate parent voice from the program level up—from the work in the field, to the program partners, to the state advisory committees, and the national board. They are being intentional to first check in with parents before they seek input from others. For example, they launched a research project about virtual home visiting and the first thing they did was to organize a conversation with parents about what the research project should

look at. Similarly, they are taking a fresh look at assessment measures and are asking families what tools work best for them.

While we celebrate these examples, there is still a way to go for all those at the Advisory Committee table to demonstrate that they fully embrace parent leadership and voice and are meaningfully incorporating parent perspectives in their organizations. We notice some hesitancy at times. We know it is new for many and change is difficult. Having parents at the table is not just to bounce ideas off parents, nor is it to expect parents to rubber stamp what the group is already planning to do. Sometimes truly listening to what parents share may be difficult because it might not be what one is expecting to hear. And one might need to read between the lines and do the translation from a parent's passionate experiences to their passionate work. Fortunately, the Advisory Committee is a safe space for exploration and learning, especially to work through challenging conversations and transformations like these. With time and resources, the Advisory Committee hopes to inspire and support innovation that will firmly root parent leadership and voice in the home visiting field across all dimensions of practice, policy, and research.

Parent Voices Are Shaping the Advisory Committee of the National Home Visiting Network, Too

In addition to contributing to the work of the Advisory Committee via monthly calls and related workgroup meetings, Nicole also serves on the Network's Internal Guidance Council (IGC). The IGC meets quarterly and includes four Advisory Committee members (one each representing parents, policy, research, and practice) plus the Network co-facilitators. The IGC helps set the agenda for future Advisory Committee meetings, weighs in on structural issues such as membership changes and challenges, and develop strategies for ensuring active participation.

The next chapter of our racial equity learning journey is focusing on indigenous communities, and Nicole is part of a small group that has been active in designing both the content and the process for this learning.

And in the spring and summer of 2023, the parent leaders helped to organize a recruitment, selection, and orientation process for a new cohort of parent leaders. Regine, Jennifer, and Nicole are all now graduates of their home visiting programs, and the Advisory Committee's commitment to having "fresh eyes" and currently enrolled parents meant that it was time for the first cohort of parents to transition. They helped develop the new parent leader criteria and application questions, reviewed applications received, interviewed the top applicants, and recommended whom to invite to join the Network table. In addition, they reflected on their orientation and designed an updated orientation and corresponding decks that better reflect what they think new parent leaders will need

to know to be able to fully participate. And they all have committed to overlapping with the new cohort and serving as peer mentors during that time to support a smooth transition.

The Unintended (and Extraordinary) Benefits for Parents

In addition to the many contributions the parent leaders have made to deliberations within the Advisory Committee, all the parents point to signs of growth both personally and professionally that they feel are unintended benefits of participating as parent leaders on the Network's Advisory Committee.

In their own words, examples of professional growth include:

- “I’ve been able to meet with a lobbyist and am helping ParentChild+ think about establishing a parent advocacy presence in Massachusetts. And I’ve gone back to work!” –Jennifer Vincent
- “My mentor asks me questions like, ‘What is the next challenge in my life?’ and, ‘What do you want to achieve?’ She offers me moral support and helped me put my resume together so that I could apply for jobs in home visiting.” –Nicole Loveless
- “Participating in the Advisory Committee has given me exposure to new things. For example, I’m stepping into learning about becoming a doula.” –Regine Cherry

Both Nicole and Regine have been invited to participate in many adjacent efforts that are also seeking parent input. For example, they both served as parent advisors for a Child Trends study of home visiting during COVID. They also play key roles with Nurture Connection, a movement that aims to promote Early Relational Health (ERH). Regine and Nicole attended a meeting at Stanford University’s design school to provide parent perspective on the development of future scientific research on ERH. Nicole is one of six parent leaders who provide a meaningful bridge between the local caregiver community and Nurture Connection. She was recently selected to be an Act Early Ambassador for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and elected as Vice Chairperson of the Indian Education Committee / Indian Parent Committee of the Albuquerque Public Schools. They also have been invited to present at conferences (e.g., 2023 BUILD conference, MI Home Visiting state meeting) and during webinars for the home visiting field (e.g., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families’ webinar on tribal early learning).

Examples of personal growth include:

- “I’m engaged in more things that I would have been fearful of before—like public speaking, learning how to be strategic, learning how to be bold, and confidently presenting myself. Now I’m facilitating meetings and speaking with more purpose. I am proud to be a conduit between the

local and state home visiting leader groups and the National Home Visiting Network.” –Regine Cherry

- “I realize that my voice matters. I feel validated and more confident. I’ve been a stay-at-home mom because my son has a lot of services that I need to coordinate. This has been huge for getting me back into having adult conversations. It’s also been eye-opening to be part of conversations like those we had on racial equity. I find myself looking at the world differently.” –Jennifer Vincent
- “I’m a stay-at-home mom. I feel very isolated at times, and I also feel bad that I don’t contribute financially to my family. It can feel belittling. This has helped me to feel more confident and has provided a way for me to contribute to my family, too. Maybe I take them out for a pizza dinner, or I pay the water bill. That has been huge for me to be able to feel that I am contributing to my family. My family has noticed a change; they say that I look better, healthier. I’m not ready to say why. I feel this is for me; it’s an emotional reward that is all mine.” –Nicole Loveless

Next Steps for the National Home Visiting Network

The Network is very much in the space of learning about what we can do to best support parent leaders so that they can participate fully, and we can fully benefit from their leadership and voice. We have not yet achieved the goal of consistent and universal co-creation with parents in all our work, nor have we found a way to include parents who are not English speakers, but we intend to keep learning from the parents and adapting so that together we can achieve those goals soon, and everyone can participate with their full selves.

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