Supporting Caregivers Impacted by Substance Use Disorders: A Conversation with Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance

Family & Community Health

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Editor's Note: This blog post is part of a series recognizing National Family Caregivers Month, which takes place in November. The posts in this series explore research, policy, and programs that can support the health and well-being of caregivers and children so families can thrive. For more on this topic, check out our Intergenerational Family Services research portfolio.

As we recognize National Family Caregivers Month, we turn our attention to the millions of parents, caregivers and households in the United States who are impacted by parental substance use disorders. These parents and families face unique challenges and often have to navigate competing demands and complex systems, including drug and alcohol treatment, child welfare, and counseling, all while balancing the recovery process with parenting responsibilities.

In response to this growing need for additional support, education, and guidance for parents navigating recovery, Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA) developed an innovative program aimed at engaging and supporting parents impacted by substance use disorders, called Families in Recovery. Since 2018, Families in Recovery, which is comprised of seven strengths-based group sessions that explore the experiences of parents in recovery, has been delivered at a variety of sites including maternal and child home visiting programs, drug and alcohol treatment centers, and family support hubs, among others. As the Families in Recovery program continues to grow and serve parents at 27 sites across the country, PolicyLab is partnering with PFSA to evaluate the implementation, engage stakeholders including program instructors and participants, better understand how varied settings and factors affect delivery of the program, and determine whether it is being administered as intended.

To learn more about the program and its impact, I sat down with Justin Donofrio, MSSW, prevention services manager at PFSA to discuss the Families in Recovery program and our collaboration.

Q: Can you briefly describe Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance's mission and vision for children, caregivers and families?

A: PA Family Support Alliance has a vision for all children to grow and thrive free from abuse and neglect. We support this vision by providing education, support and training programs to make Pennsylvania safe for children.

In short, PFSA deploys resources and programs to support and strengthen all parents and families so communities are places of belonging, empathy, and empowerment in which children may grow and thrive safely.

Q: What prompted the creation of Families in Recovery?

A: The first iteration of the program developed from the growing awareness of a need for support that helps meet caregivers at the intersection of recovery and positive parenting. While recovery programs and parenting programs have existed for quite some time, none of them addressed this unique intersection that, at the foundation of it all, has many parallels in terms of what is needed for success.

As the program grew and eventually was redesigned, the focus really became rooted in the areas of support and relationship building, along with some added structure and formation of group development principles. What we have now is a program that is flexible to meet the needs of individuals wherever they may be in their recovery and parenting journey, while helping to build a foundation and capacity for support and accountability.

Q: What are some of the unique needs of parents in recovery and their families?

A: The needs of parents who are in recovery can vary from one family to the next. Some may need social connections and support, others might need practical skills that help with communication and relationship building. The intention of the program is not to get everyone to the same starting point, but rather to meet everyone at their current starting point by acknowledging challenges, building up strengths, and creating an environment of trust and support to continue moving forward. Despite everyone starting in a different place, commonalities always present themselves. All individuals in the program are balancing recovery and parenting at the same time, and they are able to give each other the support they each need as they grow and learn from each other throughout the program.

Q: How do you hope the Families in Recovery program will support and improve the lives of parents and families impacted by substance use? How does PolicyLab's implementation evaluation support that goal?

A: This question can have many different responses. But for PFSA, the goal is to help build a foundation of support for individuals in this program and to give them a few tools that they can use to maintain and grow the specific types of support they need for their individual situations. It is not a one-size fits all approach; however, we are very interested in learning more about what resonates most for folks and what the biggest takeaways might be so that we can leverage those areas to amplify the impact of the program. That is where the implementation evaluation and PolicyLab team comes in. This evaluation will hopefully give us insights into the areas that can be tightened up and improved upon while still maintaining the flexibility needed to meet each person at their individual starting point.

Q: What advice would you give to providers, programs, and agencies who are thinking about how they can best serve or meet the needs of parents and families affected by substance use?

A: Our advice would be two-fold. First, everyone needs support and encouragement. Even in the best of times, it is difficult to overcome challenges without a support system and encouragement from others, as well as from yourself. Second, while one person in a family may use a substance, it is important to remember that substance use and substance use disorders impact the entire family and communities. Therefore, we must take the big picture into account when serving those who are affected by substance use because the impact spreads well beyond the individual. We all can have a role in being supportive and we all benefit from helping others who are in recovery.

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