



## Lived Experience Voices

**Lived experience voice**—the voices and perspectives of those who have been involved in the child welfare system—is critical to the work of supporting Wisconsin’s children, youth and families. Wisconsin is transforming the child welfare system to keep families and children together by supporting them in-home with services and resources. By leaning into the wisdom held by those with lived experience, we strengthen our commitment to transform the child welfare system while building equity and reducing barriers to reunification.

This transformation is only possible with the partnership of lived experience leaders. This National Reunification Month, we are celebrating lived experience leaders and how their work supports families in reunifying—and how it empowers families every step along the way.

### Parent Partner Making a Difference – DeAnna Cobun

DeAnna Cobun is a lived experience leader by any and every definition. She is a Parent Partner with the Parents Supporting Parents (PSP) program in Rock County. PSP is an evidence-based model that empowers parents with lived child welfare experience as mentors—or Parent Partners—to parents currently within the child welfare system. DeAnna also serves on the Parent Leaders in Child Welfare stakeholder group.

DeAnna became involved with the child welfare system in 2015 when she was struggling with alcohol. Her three children were removed from the home while DeAnna worked towards sobriety; they reunified four months later with a safety plan. DeAnna was sober for more than three years before relapsing—because sobriety is a non-linear journey—in 2019. Her family reunified in June 2020, and the case closed six months later. Six months after that, DeAnna became a Parent Partner, using her experience as both a parent involved with the child welfare system and as someone with struggles with substance use to support other parents and families in similar places.



DeAnna is very honest about everything that goes into her sobriety—the successes, the challenges, the moments of reflection and self-compassion. She’s certainly not an island in this journey; she had a strong, trusting relationship with her Child Protective Services (CPS) worker and regularly sets healthy boundaries with friends and family when she is in situations that might be triggering.





While she turned to these folks for crucial support, she also realized she wanted to get and stay sober for *herself*, for all of the things she knew she was capable of doing. “I wanted to be sober because I want to do this work,” she says.

She describes her work as a Parent Partner as “so fulfilling,” a role that means she “can come to work and feel awesome.” Each day, DeAnna shows up determined to inspire positive change—with other parents, in her community, in the child welfare system—however she can.

In her role as a Parent Partner, DeAnna encourages parents to be self-advocates. This, of course, is easier said than done. She knows that sometimes parents are reluctant to ask questions because they are confused or ashamed or overwhelmed. She helps them navigate these situations, encouraging them to share their needs—to ask for a bus pass when they need one or to talk to their CPS worker about rescheduling an appointment, they can’t attend because of their work schedule.

But DeAnna also knows very well that parents don’t always know what to advocate *for*. She now uses her role as a Parent Partner to pass along the institutional wisdom that she wishes she had when she was involved in the system. Having experience at either end of the system means she knows to encourage parents to attend parent or caregiver groups, for example. Or how to connect parents with Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse groups, like the one she sought while she was becoming sober. There are “[so many services] that I didn’t even know about that I could’ve used while I was going through the system,” DeAnna says. Now, she’s determined to make sure other parents have access to the services and supports they need.

Her determination is an around-the-clock sort of thing—literally. Some parents she works with have night shifts, and she makes sure they know they can reach out any time of day if they need a bit of support or guidance. DeAnna is a fierce and compassionate advocate in these parents’ corners, day or night.

DeAnna brings this tenacity to her role as a Parent Leader, as well, where she shifts her focus to the system more broadly. She sits on panels with other parents who have lived experience, and they share stories and insights that inform programmatic, policy and legislative changes. She also supports conference workshops and participates in learnings that help her continue to build her already-impressive capacity as an advocate for families.

DeAnna is currently in school for human services. She’s not sure what she plans on doing with her degree quite yet, but she *does* know that her lived experience is as valuable as her college credits.

DeAnna herself is a powerhouse of positive change, but as is typical of her, she’s thinking bigger. “Lived experience should be *everywhere*,” she says.

*To learn more about Parents Supporting Parents and parent partnership, visit the Department of Children and Families’ (DCF) Parents Supporting Parents webpage at:*

<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cwportal/parents-supporting-parents>

*To learn more about lived experience and lived experience opportunities in Wisconsin, visit DCF’s Lived Experience webpage:*

<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/family-first/lived-experience>

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