Latino families and the public child welfare system: Examining the role of social support networks

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The number of Latino families involved with the public child welfare system has increased exponentially in the last decade. This qualitative study examined one of this population’s inherent resources – their social network – and the role it plays when involved with the public child welfare system. Findings reveal that Latino families rely heavily on their network for emotional support, advice/information, and advocacy. Often parents received incorrect or conflicting information or advice grounded on experiences that were very different from the participant’s case. In addition, their networks are homophilous; that is, limited to people who are in their same circumstances which limits their ability to access formal sources of advocacy and support. Many parents were also genuinely interested in helping other parents with open cases. Practice recommendations are made as it relates to actively engaging Latino families in their case process and supporting Latino families by incorporating their networks and genuine interest in helping others into child welfare service delivery.

1. Introduction

For many Latino families, particularly those with a recent history of immigration to the U.S., entering the child welfare system can be a very fearful driven experience. Families are unaware of the impact that being involved with the system will have on their families and immigration status (Ayón & Aisenberg, 2010). In addition, it is likely that immigrant families have little or no experience in accessing public services or may elect to not seek services for fear of deportation if they are undocumented (Kullgreen, 2003). Involvement with the public child welfare system can be an isolating and stigmatizing experience for any family. Consequently, efforts have been made to provide additional support to families by paraprofessionals. For example, multiple interventions have emerged to develop informal sources of support among families involved with the public child welfare system including parent to parent role modeling (Cohen & Canan, 2006), foster parent to parent dyad relationships (Linares, Montalto, Li, & Oza, 2006), and mutual aid/support peer groups (Frame, Conley, & Berrick, 2006). Unfortunately these programs are not used nationwide at this point. Thus, families may have to rely on their own social networks to help them navigate this complicated system. Informed by the strengths perspective, social network theory, and interviews completed with Mexican parents with open child welfare cases, this study examined (1) who make up Latino parents’ social networks and (2) the role social networks play in families’ experiences with the public child welfare system.

2. Literature review

The number of Latino families with substantiated cases of maltreatment has steadily increased from 10% in 1995 to 14.2% in 2000 to 17.4% in 2005 to 21% in 2007 (United States Department of Health and Human Services. Administration of Children, Youth and Families, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2009). In states with large Latino populations, Latino children constitute a significant percentage of children in foster care. For example, Latino children represent 50–20% of the foster care population in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Texas (CHCF, 2004). Approximately 36% of Latino children involved with the public child welfare system have foreign born parents (Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips, 2009). Once Latino families enter the public child welfare system they are faced with many challenges as they experience a plethora of barriers to accessing services related to language, documentation status, and lack of knowledge of systems of care (Ayón, 2009).

The literature on social networks and support within the context of the child welfare system has focused on its influence on parental mental health, parenting, risk of maltreatment, and access to care. Mothers with increased levels of support report experiencing lower levels of depression and more positive parenting practices (Lyons, Henly, & Schuerman, 2005). Families who report low social support levels and high levels of life event stress have been found at higher
risk for child abuse reports (Kotch et al., 1997). Differences in type of social support have also been considered (i.e., kinship network vs. non-kin network members). The risk of child maltreatment is lower among mothers who report stronger kinship networks compared to mothers who primarily rely on non-kin support (Albarracin, Repetto, & Albarracin, 1997). Rodrigo, Martín, Múñoz, and Rodríguez (2007) examined differences in seeking help from social networks based on level of risk. They found that at-risk mothers (i.e., mothers with high scores on the violent profile or social deprivation profile) sought out help for solving child problems and personal problems, whereas the non-at-risk mothers tended to seek help from their network mostly for child problems (Rodrigo et al., 2007). Social support has been linked to increased access to mental health services (Harrison, McKay, & Bannon, 2004). That is, parents with higher levels of social support who more likely to access mental health services for their children. Among the Latino population, Mulvaney-Day, Alegría, and Sribney (2007) found that social connections promoted physical health. Similarly, family support was also found to be protective of mental health regardless of socio-economic status and language abilities. As most of the literature has focused on the relationship between social support and health outcomes, access to services, or risk of child maltreatment, this study’s contribution lies in its examination of the role social support networks can play during the case process or during an open child welfare case.

2.1. Theoretical framework

This study is informed by the strengths perspective and social network theories/concepts. The strengths perspective holds that every individual, family, and community has strengths, assets, resources, wisdom, and knowledge which inform our inherent capacity for transformation (Saleebey, 2009). The family system has been fundamental to the Latino populations’ well-being. For many Latino groups, the family is at the core of their value system. However, strong family loyalties extend beyond the immediate family and include, for example, compadres and comadres (godparents or padrinos) as part of their family in addition to community members such as elderly person who may hold positions of respect within their community. Latino social networks have been linked with helping newly immigrated individuals/families adjust to the migration process and to confront social inequities in the U.S. (Baca Zinn, 1994; Falicov, 2007). Latino families’ natural support systems have been categorized into four principal groups including (a) family, friends, and close neighbors; (b) religious groups; (c) folk healers; and (d) commercial establishments and social clubs (Delgado, 1995).

Homophily is the tendency for individuals to associate and bond with people who are like them (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). According to McPherson et al. (2001) homophily limits people's social worlds as relationships and networks have powerful implication for the diffusion of information, attitudes people form, and their interactions. The Latino population tends to be highly homophilous. Consider for example where the Latino population is concentrated in the US, their levels of education, and social economic location. Although there have been some recent shifts, historically Latino communities have been highly concentrated in Mexico–US Border states. Approximately 40% (or 15 million) of the Latino population is foreign born and immigrant/foreign communities tend to be highly segregated (Fischer, Stochmayer, Stiles, & Hout, 2004). The educational level for Latino communities is low. Ramirez and de la Cruz (2002) report that two in five Latinos have not graduated from high school, one fourth of Latinos have less than a 9th grade education, and only 11% have a Bachelor’s level education. Approximately 23% of the Latino population live below the poverty line (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). As the Latino community tends to be highly homophilous in their neighborhoods, levels of education and economic circumstances, these factors place them at higher risks for social isolation and they may have fewer opportunities to interact with people who are unlike them.

Granovetter’s (1973) concept of weak ties should also be considered when looking at social networks among Latino families involved with the public child welfare system. Granovetter finds that weak ties are likely to link groups which can lead to greater diffusion of information, mobilization, or opportunities. Strong ties are limited to those around us, whereas weak ties link us to individuals who are outside our day to day social circle. If Latino families’ ties are strong and limited to family members and neighborhood members and weak ties to members outside of the community are not present (due to for example segregation), then Granovetter’s argument may hold true for this population. The absence of weak ties may impact this populations’ ability to mobilize, receive information, and advocate for change. While Latino families’ strong social network is a resource, the strengths of their weak ties and degree of homophily found in their network may limit what their network can do for them within the context of the child welfare system.

3. Methods

3.1. Sampling procedures

Purposive sampling was used to obtain a sample of nineteen parents with open child welfare cases. Parents were recruited in the waiting room of a public child welfare agency in Southern California (referred to as “the department” in this paper). Parents were approached by the researcher and informed about the study. Appointments were scheduled with parents who meet the eligibility criteria (i.e., Mexican origin, 1–2 generation in the U.S., and involved with the department due to neglect and/or physical abuse) and who were interested in participating in an interview. Based on the parents’ preference the interviews were completed in the parents’ home or at a local park. A limitation of this study was that recruitment was limited to those individuals who came to the department to see their child (ren) or for services. As many services are home-based many parents were excluded from participating in the study. Participants received a $25 remuneration for their time.

3.2. Participants

Nineteen parents (16 mothers and 3 fathers, representing 16 families) with open child welfare cases participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. The number of children in each family ranged from one to six. Fifty two percent (n = 10) of parents were immigrants from Mexico and the remaining parents were born in the U.S. and children of Mexican immigrants. Parents’ educational level ranged from 6th grade to some college or trade. At the time of the interviews, parents had their case open between two months and two years. Of the 16 families, nine (or 56%) reported that their children had been in an out-of-home placement; with 25% (n = 4) in foster care, 12.5% (n = 2) placed with relatives, and 12.5% (n = 2) parents had children in both relative and foster placement. In 19% of the cases (n = 3), children had been returned to their families.

3.3. Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to obtain parents’ perceptions on their experiences with the public child welfare system. The interview guide was designed by the author for this research. The interview guide included questions about parent’s experiences with the public child welfare system including their relationship with their worker, their process of accessing services, and cultural relevance of services. Although the role of parents’ social networks was not a primary purpose of this study, it became evident in the interviews that parents relied on their social networks throughout their case
process. Parents' were asked if they knew other parents with open child welfare cases and (1) if that relationship informed their experience with the system, and (2) in what ways. Parents were asked for examples and other probing questions were used throughout the interview. The interview guide also included questions on demographic information on the family, worker and case, and the family's immigration history. The interviews were audio taped with consent. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 min in length and were completed in Spanish or English depending on the participants' preference.

3.4. Content analysis

The procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were used to complete the content analysis. Open coding was completed using a constant comparative approach to compare incident to incident within and between interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding involves four procedures: (a) identifying and labeling each distinct incident or idea; (b) categorizing the data by grouping concepts that represent similar phenomena; (c) labeling or naming the identified categories. A model was developed to illustrate the findings (see Fig. 1). Quotes are included to support the model.

4. Results

4.1. Parent's social network

Throughout the interviews parents report that they rely on their family, extended family members, and friends for support and help. Several parents report social network growth as they meet other families that have open child welfare cases at the child welfare office and through the services they are mandated to complete; for example, through parenting classes, at rehabilitation centers, and other types of support groups. In addition, parents also rely on service providers (e.g., counselor, group facilitators) for advice and support.

![Parent's social support system](image)

**Fig. 1.** Parent's social support system.

4.2. Role of social network throughout parent's involvement with the public child welfare system

Parents' social networks assist them in multiple ways including providing moral and emotional support, sharing information about the child welfare system – which may inform their perceptions of what to expect and help in accessing services – and advocacy.

4.2.1. Moral support

Moral support is important to parents as they often feel alone and they are unaware of the process. In the following quote the participant describes her experience in a support group where other parents discuss their experiences in parenting and with the child welfare system. The parent goes on to state that participating in the group helped her feel a sense of relief and helped her view her case from a different perspective.

[Los otros padres me dicen]...esto no está bien así o de este modo o a que calarle de este modo o así...es que si es un alivio oír de mas padres, mas consejos de otros padres, como lidiar con los hijos. Cada caso es diferente, pero es otra ventana para ver al mundo...ósea uno nomás ve su caso porque está aquí pero cuando ve uno otros [padres] o más casos ya dice uno pues podemos trabajar de este modo o de otro.[The other parents say...this is not right or it should be this way or let's try this way or something...it's a relief to hear the other parents, to hear their advice, how to deal with kids. Every case is different, but it's a different window to view the world...that is we only view our case because it's here in front of you but when you see other parents or other cases then you think we can work this way or other ways.]

In the next quote the parent describes various persons in her life that provide support to her.

[My mom], she has been very helpful in the process. My case manager [at the domestic violence shelter] has been available to make phone calls to my social worker. She interacts with social workers for other clients and...My sister...she doesn't have any knowledge of [the department] or know the whole thing cause I'm tired of telling everyone...tired of talking about it. I'm just trying to put everything in the past, but she is there as somebody to listen.

4.2.2. Sharing of information

Often families are not familiar with how the child welfare system functions thus they rely on the experiences of others (i.e., members of their network). Parents' networks inform their perceptions of what they can expect from workers, how a case should be, and the type of support services they should have access too.

Marcela, a participant describes her interaction with other parents with open cases. "[I] meet other parents with open cases [because] they are in the same place...we meet...when we go see the social workers or you know...we are all there for the same thing." "[W]e talk about...Who's your social worker, what does she have you doing, uhm...how long do you have to do it...when are they closing your case, uhm... how long does she have you drug testing...stuff like that".

In the following quote Ana, a mother who is a recent immigrant, shares the information that was shared to her by a family friend whose mother is a foster parent.

Más a uno de inmigrante [no sabe uno que esperar]. Cuando llegaron aquí [los trabajadores] yo tenía temor de que me iban a quitar a mis hijos. Estaba yo pues que me va a pasar, porque llegan
de sorpresa. [Una amiga] me decía no firmes ningún papel, no hagas esto… Ella está mas involucrada porque su mamá trabaja con niños fosters. Le platico yo… Le dije pues me paso esto… y porque te está pasando eso? Por la chamaca… me esta pasando con la chamaca esto o lo otro. Ahí me dijo: No te firmes nada. Uma pos ya les firme. Y porque te vienen a ver dos una vez al mes una y otra una vez a la semana, si tengo una cuña, dio eso si esta re- mal, esta con un viejo que roba, que hace droga, que de veras se ve que es una familia que esta bien mal, deja los niños desatendidos dice. Y ella nadamas la van a ver una vez por mes. Bueno por decirte que a ella ya hasta le quitaron los niños. Le dijo lo mismo que usted, yo los deje entrar para que vean como vivimos, y en realidad que es…si fuera a suceder se va hacer más rebelde la chamaca o se va apacalar. Para que vieran quien es el problema de la casa.[More as an immigrant, we don't know what to expect.]

When the workers arrived I was afraid that they were going to take my kids away. I was like what’s going to happen, because their arrival was a surprise. A friend told me don’t sign any papers, don’t do this… She was more aware because her mother worked with foster children. I told her well this happened to me. And why is this happening to you [she asked]. Because my daughter… this is happening with my daughter. And why are you visited twice or once a month by one worker and once a week by another worker. My sister in law, she really has problems, she’s with a man who steals and that does drugs, their family is really bad, she leaves the children alone. And she only sees one worker once a month. They already removed her children. I told her the same thing I’m telling you, I let them in so that they could see how we live, and what the truth is. So that they can see who the problem is in the house.]

In the above quote Ana received information that may be misguiding since her friend may be not be aware that Ana is receiving Family Preservation services. Thus, the friend interprets visits by two workers as excessive rather than as a preventive measure. In the next quote Ana was having some challenges paying bills, she shared not share this information with a counselor from a prevention program at her children’s school. The counselor is familiar with the Family Preservation program and she informs Ana of the different resources she has access to through the program.

Y me dijo una señora de la escuela es una consejera del [nombre] programa. Dijo Ana si usted está participando en Family Preservation es para que le ayuden, y yo no sabía. Dijo mire le pueden ayudar por ejemplo para pagarlas los biles y la renta…o ayudarles encontrar casa si no tiene donde vivir. Ahí dije pues yo no sabía. Hábële a su trabajadora y pregúntele. Y yo le comente a [mi trabajadora de Family Preservation] y me dijo pues voy a buscar…[A woman from the school, she’s a counselor in the [name] program. She said Ana [participant pseudo name], if you are participating in Family Preservation they should be helping you, but I didn’t know. She said they can help you for example to pay your bills and rent…or to find a home if you didn’t have a place to live. I told her I didn’t know that. She said speak to your worker and ask her. I told my Family Preservation worker and she said I’m going to look…]

In the following quote the father shares an argument that he had with his worker as the worker informed him they will lose their parental rights. He bases his reaction on what he observes in his mother’s case. His mother is the legal guardian for some of her grandchildren.

Si le dije…como me puedes tu decir a mí, yo no sé de leyes pero a mí no me vas a decir que ya van estirando esto mucho si apenas llevamos un año digo apenas llevas un año en el caso…OK apenas un año y me dices que es mucho tiempo. Mi mama tiene a mis sobrinos, ella esta como el guardián legal de ellos OK va para 16 años le digo y no los ha adoptado legalmente, porque ella tiene la esperanza de que mi cuñada se rehabilité y agarre a su familia para atrás. Como me puedes decir a mí que por un año no puedes ya hacer nada. Que los tienen que adoptar a fuerzas otra familia o mi cuñada. Le digo no esto no puede ser así. Si yo no hubiera visto el caso de mi mama te creería pero lo estoy viviendo que no. Estoy allí con mis sobrinos y todo. Y mi mama no la forzó que los adopte legalmente. Ellos están como guardians legales nomás.[Yes I told her…how can you tell me, I don’t know about laws, but how can you come here and tell me that we are spending too much time if we only have a year; that is, we only have one year with the case…OK one year and you are going to tell me that it’s too much time. My mom has my nephews, she has them as a legal guardian OK I tell her she’s had them for about 16 years and she hasn’t adopted them legally because she is hopeful that one day my sister in law will rehabilitate and get her family back. How can you tell me after just one year that I can’t do anything anymore? That someone must adopt them — other family or my sister in law. I tell her no this can’t be the only way. If I hadn’t seen my mother’s case I would believe her but I am living something different. I’m with my nephews. And my mom wasn’t forced into adopting the kids legally. They are only under legal guardianship only.]

This quote highlights this parent’s lack of awareness of current child welfare policy, his rights, and different options available for families.

Information that parents receive from others informs their perceptions of workers or the case process and may also instill fear in them. Martha, shares her fear of her children being abused while in care or of never having her children returned home. “Unas [personas]… de la escuela donde hemos ido nos han platicado todo de lo que les han hecho…Como una señora que me dijo que violaron a su niña. Y conozco otra señora que tiene 11 años peleando a sus hijos. Y ahí varias personas que yo conozco que han estado batallando con [el departamento] también.”[Some of the people from the school that we go to [referring to parenting classes] have told us about everything that has happened to them. Like one lady said that her daughter was raped. I know another lady that has been fighting for her children for 11 years. There are several persons that I know that have struggled with the child welfare system.]

In the next example, the parent feels that she is going out of her way to please the worker by getting all the paper work from her children’s school and she does it based on “horror stories” she’s heard and fear they have created in her. “I feel like that if I don’t cooperate or if I don’t do those things, I feel like it can be held against me or I can be treated differently for that because I am not helping them. And they can take it like well you are not helping me so this is what’s going to happen to you. Cause I’ve heard so many horror stories about social workers that do that. And not necessarily something that you are doing wrong, it’s not my job to do that stuff that’s her job.”

The information that is shared by social network members also informs participants’ access to services. For example, Juana shares that her boyfriend’s sister played a critical role in helping her find inpatient service. “This is all free…there is no fee here, this is a Christian based home…My boyfriend’s sister, she works in the church, they are all connected so she told me about it.” Another mother shares that someone in her children’s school told her about parenting classes. “Las clases de padres…fue alguien de la escuela me dijo que en la high school las daban gratis.”[The parenting classes… it was someone from my children’s school who told me that the high school offered free classes.]
Several parents shared examples of how their network may advocate for them. In addition, participants shared how they advocated for other parents with open cases by encouraging them, sharing information about their personal experience, and informing them about services in the community. The following quote illustrates two different functions of the participants' support network. First a friend who previously had an open case advises the participant to see a supervisor and then the participant's domestic violence counselor accompanies her to her meeting with the supervisor and advocates on her behalf. The participant stresses having someone with you that will support and advocate for you is crucial.

Si he conocido a gente con casos pero ya están cerrados...los conozco de aquí en la casa. Lo que pasa es que [la dueña de casa]...su hermano se caso con una señorita y ella le recogieron sus niñas pero hace años. [Cuando hable con ellos de mi experiencia]...a ellos todos se les hizo raro. Porque a mucha gente se los quitan por alcoholismo o drogas. Y yo no tomo ni hago nada. Por eso todos se sorprendieron cuando paso todo esto. Porque ellos cuando miraban que mi trabajadora anterior no me hacía caso o así...como a ella se le hacía raro como hacían las cosas y decían porque...a mi me quitaron las niñas porque hacían drogas pero a ti no entiendo porque. [Ella me recomendó], me dijo que hablarla con la supervisora. Si yo hable con la supervisora, fue mi trabajadora la del [program de violencia domestica] ese día. Ella siempre a ido con migo. Lo que pasa fue que casi ya iban a ser 3 meses de que me iban a regresar los niños. Y a mi eso fue lo que me dijeron cuando yo firme. Y le dije que explora mi caso. Y eso fue lo que hizo la supervisora. [Lleve a la consejera] porque...para sentirme más segura. Porque como la supervisora no hablaba español, si pusieron una traductora [pero] las cosas que no se decían bien [la trabajadora del programa de violencia domestica me las] explicaba bien. Porque muchas veces cuando nomás hablan ingles y no español confunden las palabras. Yo le dije que me habían recomendado que hablara con la supervisora del caso porque yo también ya tenía casi un mes que no me regresaban a los niños porque no los traía. Todo eso, hable de todo lo que no me gustaba. Y si me hicieron caso, a la semana me cambiaron la trabajadora fue cuando cambiaron el caso y...ya me presento la otra trabajadora. [Yo le recomendaría a otros padres] que no salgan de la oficina de niños. Y que hagan lo que les digan. Y todo lo que no les guste que lo digan cualquier detalle o cualquier cosa y si no les hacen caso que pidan hablar con la supervisora. Pero que lleven a alguien siempre de apoyo.[I have known people with cases but they are closed[cases]...I know them from here where I live. What happens is that the owner of the house...her brother is married to a woman and they took her daughters but years ago. When I talked to them about my experience...they all thought it was strange because [usually kids] are taken away for alcoholism and drug use from a lot of people. I don't drink or do anything. That's why everyone was surprised when all this happened. Because when they saw that my last social worker didn't listen to me or anything...it was strange to her [the friend] how things were done and they asked why...They took my [the friend] daughters away because I did drugs but I don't understand why they took yours. She recommended, she said to talk to the supervisor...Yes, I talked with the supervisor...my worker from the domestic violence program came with me that day. She has always gone with me. What happened is that it was almost going to be 3 months that they said they were going to return my children. That's what they told me when I signed. I asked her to explore my case. And that's what the supervisor did. I took my worker because...to feel more confident. Because since the supervisor does not speak English, they did have a translator but the things that are not translated well the worker from the domestic violence program would explain them to me. Because many times when they only speak English and not Spanish they confuse the words. I told them that someone had recommended that I talk to the supervisor about the case because I had also not seen the children in a month since they wouldn't bring them. All that, I talked about everything that I didn't like. And they listened. In a week they changed the social worker that I had, that's when they changed the case and...a new social worker came...I would recommend to other parents that they don't leave the [department]...And to do what they are told to do. And to say everything that they don't like, every detail and if they don't listen to ask to talk to the supervisor. But they should always take someone to support them.]

Parents shared stories of how they have supported other parents with open cases. In the following quote Christina shares her interaction with an acquaintance. “She [is] my husband's childhood friend's wife...Recently she had come to my door after all this had happened and told me that her children were taken away so I am kind of a little bit ahead of her because my kids were detained in January and her kids were detained in March, so I kind of knew what would be happening next, so I just told her briefly you need to do this, you need to do that...start now don't waste any time.”

Another parent shares her experience in helping other parents access services. “A couple of them have been friends and because they know that I went through something, they would come and ask me for advice and I just told them do what you need to do. But a lot of them are people that know somebody that knows me and for some reason, people ask me for help a lot or I'll try to advocate for them or find resources for them, you know, because a lot of people I know in the area are really poor and don't know they have access to a lot of stuff that can really help them.”

5. Limitations

This is an exploratory study with a small purposive sample based on interviews with 19 Latino parents. Participants were recruited from one child welfare agency in Southern California. They were recruited in the reception area of the office limiting who could participate as most services are home-based; thus, only participants who came into the office to visit their children or for services were invited to participate. Given the small sample size, generalizability of the findings to all Latino families involved with the public child welfare system is not possible. However, this study does provide some insight into the experiences of Latino families involved with the public child welfare system and the role of social support networks. Findings highlight the strengths of Latino families' social support networks, the need to actively engage families in the case process, inform families of their rights, and link families to formal sources of advocacy. Further research in this area is needed to examine difference in the role of social support networks play in child welfare cases by immigration history and documentation status among Latino families.

6. Discussion and implications

An inherent strength of the Latino community is their social support network. However, the ability of their network may be limited as they tend to be highly homophilous and they have limited weak ties. Very few parents reported access to individuals outside of intra-familial networks. Those that did, for example the parent who had access to a formal source of support through a domestic violence counselor, were able to access formal sources of advocacy and support prompting changes if they were unsatisfied with their case process. The parent was seeking that the department take accountability for their actions. She had been told that her children would be returned sooner and have frequent visitations with her children. Although the
participant told her social worker about her dissatisfaction no change occurred until the participant met with the supervisor. As she stated bringing the worker from the domestic violence shelter made a difference in her interactions with the department. Formal sources of support are needed for Latino families particularly those that are not English proficient.

The participants’ quotes also speak to the need for social workers to be trained to engage families in culturally responsive ways including the use of competent interpreters. Often cultural competence is viewed as something that is learned in one day or one hour training instead it should be approached as a life long process where social workers work toward not only meeting the immediate needs of diverse families but also work toward changing oppressive systems. Assessments should include examining the presence/absence and strength of social supports available to families. Many families, particularly those with a recent history of immigration, may have limited social networks or sources of support (Ayón, 2011). As highlighted in the findings, social support agents serve to listen and provide emotional/moral support to families during stressful situations. If families do not have natural forms of support, social workers should refer them to parent support groups. Several parents mentioned the relief they experienced to learn that other Latino parents experienced similar challenges.

The results from this study indicate that parents rely on their social network for information/advice and advocacy. Although Latino parents reported that they often received information that was helpful in regard to accessing services, they are in need of information about child welfare legislation, departmental processes, and their rights within this context. Latino parents rely on their networks for guidance but in some cases they received incorrect or incomplete information. In order to be actively engaged in their case process, parents need to be privy to information about the case process and their rights. Such information should be provided by their caseworkers or easily accessible through other departmental staff.

Parents also reported a genuine interest in assisting other parents with open cases. Programs that involve parents as mentors to other parents with open child welfare cases should be supported and funded. Mentor parents could be trained to support other parents through their process, direct families to needed services, and also serve as a catalyst to disseminate accurate information about the child welfare system. Such programs can serve as an opportunity for Latino parents to build on their inherent strengths and genuine interest in helping others. The leadership skills that they gain through this process can be translated into other areas of their lives such as role modeling for their children and enhance their employment opportunities; thereby, creating long lasting changes in the lives of families.

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