Genograms:

A Visual Tool for Family Connections

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Genograms are visual tools that social workers, mental health professionals and genealogists have long used to help understand families. They provide a graphic representation of what a family looks like. Given the complexity of family relationships in child welfare cases, they are also a useful tool for helping to advocate for clients — including non-resident fathers.

Two good places to begin to understand what genograms look like and how to use them are *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention* by McGoldrick, Gerson and Shellenberger, and *Representing Children in Child Protection Proceedings: Ethical and Practical Dimensions* by Jean Koh Peters. The first reference focuses on some of the social work and mental health issues involved, while the second contains a discussion of using genograms, as well as several case examples that include a variety of diagrams. Additionally, many software programs, including GenoPro (www.genopro.com) provide the opportunity to generate easy-to-read, consistent formats for the genogram.

Having a diagram of the family helps an advocate or caseworker in a number of ways:

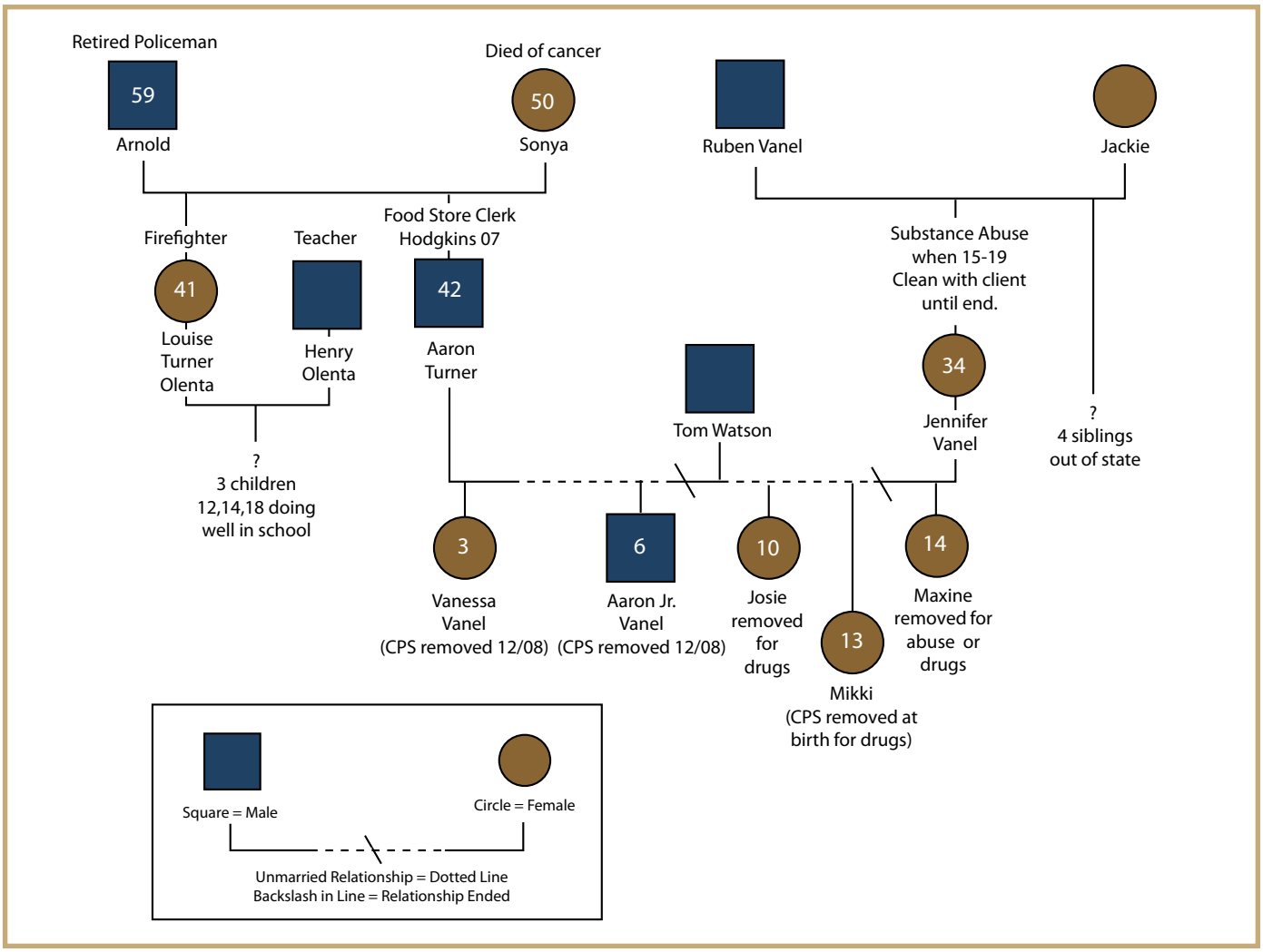
- It provides a quick reference point for understanding the critical family members in a child's life.
- It helps advocates identify paternal or maternal relatives, a father's relationship to other children in a child welfare case and potential caretakers for a child.
- It is an invaluable resource in meetings as a one-page summary of critical family relationships, enabling the person who developed the chart to both understand and convey that understanding of the child's critical family members at meetings and court appearances.

A genogram also gives the father the opportunity to identify other family members who might help with caring for the child, or who could provide care for the child themselves if the father is not ready or able to do so. Often, when a caseworker or attorney begins to work with a non-resident father in a child welfare case, the first meetings can be filled with challenges. Questions about why the father is non-resident can be threatening or focus on negative events from the past. One way to begin to talk with a non-resident father is to get a sense of his family.

For example, if the child is already in foster care, one of the things to explore is whether a member of his family

might be able to provide help in caring for the child or say something positive about the father. Ask if the father thinks that someone in his family could provide a good home for the child. Talk about the importance of support systems for fathers and other caretakers. Then, explain that you are going to do a family tree so that you can understand and remember who is who in his family. Tell him that as you go through the chart, if there are people who he thinks would be helpful to his case — either because they can say something positive about him or because he thinks that they can be potential caretakers or supports — he should let you know. Social work and mental health experts say that this type of discussion can help the father feel empowered and an active part of his case.

Genograms are also useful throughout the life of the case. Advocates and others can update them or adapt them for different purposes. For example, you can use a single genogram to identify the number of placements a child has had to go through in foster care or to link persons on the genogram with service providers such as therapists, parenting coaches and mentors.

More details on integrating genograms into legal work with fathers can be found in *Advocating for Nonresident Fathers in Child Welfare Cases*, which was recently published by the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law and the National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers in the Child Welfare System. Download the book for free or get information about ordering hard copies at http://www.fatherhoodqic.org/book.shtml.

Sample Genogram