



CITIZEN CONNECTIONS

Greetings, and welcome to the spring edition of Citizen Connections, the e-newsletter of the National Citizen Review Panel community. Here you will find interviews with Toni Lawal, Tennessee’s Citizen Review Panel (CRP) Coordinator, and Stuart Oppenheim, Executive Director of the Child and Family Policy Institute of California; an update on the Pennsylvania CRP; and Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (OCAN) and Children’s Bureau (CB) updates.

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Toni Lawal Reflects on Her Work as Tennessee’s Citizen Review Panel Coordinator

By Blake Jones

I had the chance to interview Tennessee CRP Coordinator Toni Lawal. She reflects on lessons learned in the role and gives advice for new coordinators.

Please tell us a little about yourself (your role, history with CRPs, etc.):

“I have worked for the University of Tennessee College of Social Work Office of Research and Public Service since 2004. Before taking on the role of CRP coordinator for Tennessee in 2006, I worked at the university as a trainer and research associate for child welfare projects. Also, right after college, I worked for the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services (TDCS) for 6 years, where I handled and investigated child sexual abuse cases the entire time I worked at the agency.”

Tell us about Tennessee’s CRPs:

“Tennessee has four panels, which operate in Hamilton, Montgomery, and Shelby Counties and in the Northwest Region. Each panel is diverse, both



demographically and professionally, and each panel's activities reflect its community's interests, state and federal priorities, and needs. Each CRP receives assistance and staff support from the TDCS, the lead state agency for overseeing child protective services (CPS) and child welfare reform. The staff attending the panels' meetings share departmental updates and assist with case reviews, data collection, collaboration, and overall capacity building to meet federal and state standards and requirements for improving child welfare practice.

Some of the CRPs' accomplishments include:

- Development of a comprehensive handbook to empower Tennessee youth in their transition from foster care
- Implementation of child abuse reporting online training
- Recommendation that DCS designate a child abuse hotline number for schools (implemented in 2011)"

What are the most rewarding and challenging aspects of your work?

"The most rewarding part of my job is working with such a fine group of caring advocates and volunteers who are devoted to improving the well-being of vulnerable families rather than being motivated by the hope of personal gain. Also, I am so proud of the progress the volunteers have made over the past few years—for example, when they looked at prevention, intervention, and treatment approaches to address child protection for families in which substance abuse is an issue; in my opinion, that was one of their best reports (2018).

The most challenging aspect of my work is funding—I wish there was money to send more volunteers to the annual National CRP Conference. We all need to be revived, and attending the conference does that for me, particularly the discussions around deciding what future actions should be taken to keep children safe."

What advice would you give to a new CRP coordinator?

"Develop trusting relationships with your CRP and child welfare community and stay informed of the issues affecting your work. Also, when you have a bad or challenging day, think about the days and challenges of the 400,000 or so children in foster care in the U.S. Another piece of advice: have a mission for why you do what you do. I have one for myself and I carry that mission statement to heart: "love for children and community."

California Dreamin': A Conversation With Stuart Oppenheim

By Blake Jones



Tell us a little about yourself (profession, etc.):

"This is from my brief bio:

Stuart Oppenheim is the Executive Director of the Child and Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC). After 32 years in public human services, including 15 years as the Child Welfare Director in San Mateo County, California, Stuart retired in 2004 to found CFPIC, a private nonprofit that works with public human services agencies in California to identify and spread best practices. Stuart is proud to currently work with a highly skilled and motivated workforce of 23 full-time and part-time employees and a number of independent consultants who are passionately committed to improving the delivery of human services programs for the benefit of children, youth, families, and older and disabled adults throughout California."

What is your role with the CRPs?

"I am the principal investigator for our contract with the California Department of Social Services for the administration of California's three CRPs. I cofacilitate the Critical Incidents CRP, which focuses on child abuse and neglect fatalities and near-fatalities. There are two other CRPs—one focused on prevention, the other on children and family services."

How is California different than other states in terms of child welfare services, community engagement, etc.?

"California is one of nine state-supervised, county-administered child welfare systems. Because the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act requirement for CRPs is at the state level, there is a potential disconnect between the work of the CRPs and the agencies responsible for delivering child welfare services in our

state. CRP recommendations are made to the state agency, which has limited authority over the operations at the county level. California statute requires that any new mandate be accompanied by new funding, so recommendations with county-level implications would require statutory changes and funding. Thus, the complicating factor for the CRPs is that they are not usually able to make recommendations that will directly impact child welfare practice. Volunteers are recruited from across the state, who are able to think systemically about how they might make recommendations that will guide the state in influencing practice in 58 counties with the knowledge that mandating practice changes is not feasible.”

Tell us about the CRP makeover in California:

“The original implementation of CRPs in California occurred in 3 of California’s 58 counties, which were personally recruited by the Director of the California Department of Social Services. These were wholly focused on practice at the local level, with little or no relationship with the overall functioning of child welfare systems across the state. The current Director of the State Office of Child Abuse Prevention, Angela Ponivas, who oversees the state supervision of the CRPs, has worked over the past several years to transition the CRPs to statewide panels focused on specific topic areas (e.g., prevention, child and family services, and critical incidents). California has just begun the second multi-year contract cycle for the facilitation of the three CRPs. The first contract cycle was with an organization that did not have its home office in California and continued for three years. The RFP for the current cycle resulted in the awarding of this contract to CFPIC in October 2020. The topic areas remain the same, and each panel is currently working on solidifying its work plan for the coming 2 years (with an option to extend the contract for a third year).”

What are your hopes for the CRPs in California in 1 year and 3 years?

“CFPIC and Resource Development Associates were pleased to take up the work with three existing panels and to recruit additional members who could join in their work. We perceived two gaps in their operations that we felt we should address. First, regarding the relationship between the panels and the California Department of Social Services, we perceived that panel members did not always understand the functions and limitations of the state agency and would often make recommendations that were not feasible, given those

realities. Second, in terms of the relationship among the panels, we noted that each panel was working in isolation and, therefore did not see a relationship of their work to one another along a continuum from prevention, through children and family services, to child abuse and neglect fatalities and near-fatalities.

In our initial work, we have made efforts to address both of these gaps, and we hope to see those relationships grow over the course of the next few years so that there is a sense of common purpose among the panels and with the California Department of Social Services. We believe that our extensive history with California’s human services system (as former administrators at the county level and as contractors with the county and state system) will enable us to guide the panels toward those goals. In addition, we hope that by the end of our first contract cycle we will have enabled the panels to make feasible, doable recommendations that are having a genuine positive impact on the lives of California’s vulnerable children and families.”

“Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in.”

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AUTHOR UNKNOWN

State Updates

Pennsylvania

Despite travel restrictions due to COVID-19, Pennsylvania’s three regional panels have been able to operate virtually while continuing to maintain full membership. Each panel is meeting monthly to bimonthly to allow for shorter, more frequent, Zoom calls. This year, the regional panels are working on the following focus areas:

- Northeast Panel: the impact of substance abuse on children and families involved in the child welfare system
- South-Central Panel: the increased need for medical consultation during child abuse investigations
- Southwest Panel: supporting the implementation of the state’s new “Complex Case Planning for Children and Youth Under Age 21” bulletin

Pennsylvania's Statewide Youth Advisory Board (YAB) continues to meet quarterly, using a virtual platform. In March 2021, the YAB hosted a virtual college fair for Pennsylvania's older youth. This college fair was unique because it featured 10 different college and university programs that support youth who are lower-income, at-risk, and/or in foster care. The Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency addressed financial aid information specific to youth in foster care. Also, a panel of college students formerly in foster care talked about the strengths and challenges of transitioning from foster care to post-secondary education.

The state is looking forward to hosting its spring All-Panel Meeting on April 27, 2021. During the spring All-Panel Meeting, the panels will have an opportunity to meet with members of the Department of Human Services to discuss the department's priorities, participate in a discussion on race, equity, and inclusion, share thoughts on possible new annual report recommendations, and receive updates on previous recommendations.

Understanding the need to build on a firm foundation, the state has worked with each of the panels to revisit its vision, mission, goals, and objectives and to establish a structured work plan to lay out the concrete steps for moving its efforts forward over the course of this year and the next.

While it might not be the most important thing done this year, visioning has been an important part of the work of each panel, and Pennsylvania believes that its panels are notable for their aspirations. The state sees the following as examples of Pennsylvania's dreams for its most vulnerable children and their families.

"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

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ANNE FRANK

Safety Science: A Path for CRPs to Support Child Safety in Their State

CRPs are uniquely positioned to support child safety in their community and state. A recent article by the Casey Foundation highlights the need for CRPs to be aware of cutting-edge information that could impact the health

and safety of children in their states. The article outlines several important strategies:

- **The physical and psychological safety of staff is critically important.** In the face of a rapidly evolving pandemic, a focus on caring for staff well-being is paramount. For example, New Jersey's Department of Children and Families created an online COVID-19 [mindfulness toolkit](#) to support staff mental health during this stressful time.
- **Race equity and safety culture must go hand in hand.** For example, Connecticut's Department of Children and Families' safety culture framework, Safe & Sound, explicitly invokes the agency's racial justice work as a key component.
- **Crisis and safety culture both require adaptive leadership skills.** With a high percentage of staff suddenly dispersed, leaders are finding they must place more trust in their frontline staff's decision-making than ever before. The pandemic has forced child welfare leaders to rely heavily on more virtual platforms.
- **Leaders must personally spearhead and model safety culture.** To be effective, safety culture must be reflected and consistently communicated by leadership. For example, New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) found success by starting its orientation to safety culture at the highest levels of leadership, gradually moving down through layers of management until all leaders understood how to support the culture shift.
- **External stakeholders are essential partners.** Building a safety culture is most effective when external stakeholders, including political leaders and oversight entities, are fully engaged.
- **Safety culture is a work in progress.** New York City's ACS has incorporated safety science into in-service trainings offered through its Workforce Institute, recognizing that efforts to sustain a safety culture must be ongoing.

CRPs can support child welfare agencies as they try to implement the strategies outlined above and can act as a community voice in ensuring that the agency is using the best information available to serve families and children.

The entire article may be retrieved from <https://www.casey.org/safety-collaborative-summary/>

“Service to others is the rent you pay for
your room here on Earth.”

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MUHAMMAD ALI

OCAN/CB Updates

Welcome Associate Commissioner Schomburg

In late February, the [Children’s Bureau welcomed](#) Biden administration appointee Aysha E. Schomburg, J.D., as the new Associate Commissioner for the Children’s Bureau.

Associate Commissioner Schomburg previously served as the Senior Administrator for Program Oversight for the New York City ACS, working collaboratively with agency leaders to develop and implement plans for the operational infrastructure of ACS while also developing and coordinating comprehensive organizational capacity building strategies across programs. In addition, during the COVID-19 public health crisis Ms. Schomburg worked closely with the Department of Education and Department of Homeless Services to create and coordinate guidance for frontline staff.

Prior to joining ACS, Ms. Schomburg held a number of key leadership positions with the New York City Council where she most recently served as the Assistant Deputy Director. Under this title, she managed legislative activities of 13 committees in the Human Services Division and provided legal counsel to the Speaker and Council Members. Ms. Schomburg, who has bar admissions in both New York and New Jersey, received her B.A. from the University of Virginia, her M.A. from New York University, and her J.D. from New York Law School.

Ms. Schomburg has been busy working to advance the administration’s priorities and further the work of the Children’s Bureau to support children and families.

American Rescue Plan Act of 2021

In March 2021, President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 into law. The law includes critical funding to support state and community efforts to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect during a time when children and families are

experiencing increased hardship as a result of the pandemic. Specifically, the act provides an additional \$350 million in funding for the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). This includes an additional \$100 million for grants to states to improve CPS systems (under Title I of CAPTA) and \$250 million was included for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention programs (under Title II of CAPTA). For more information on guidance for states and grantees on these supplemental CAPTA funds, please visit [What’s New in Laws and Policies](#) on the Children’s Bureau’s website.

Prevention Resource Guide

As part of Child Abuse Prevention Month, the Children’s Bureau develops a host of different activities and resources to support children and families. These are released each April but are available and applicable all year.

The [2021/2022 Prevention Resource Guide](#) recognizes that there are actions we can take as a society and within communities, organizations, and families to address the root causes of child abuse and neglect. The Guide seeks to highlight the innovative ways that communities around the country are doing purposeful prevention work to help children and families thrive. The [protective factors](#) continue to be central to the work, and employing a protective factors approach focuses on positive ways to engage families by emphasizing their strengths, in addition to identifying areas where they have room to grow with support.

The 2021/2022 Prevention Resource Guide is available for download at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/resource-guide/>.

Reminders

Children’s Bureau divisions and offices, in particular the Policy Division, routinely post guidance, updates, and response to public inquiries online. Information on legislative and program updates, as well as a series of FAQs, are posted and continuously updated at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/laws-policies/whats-new>.

June



National CRP Webinar
(Focus: Safety science)

July



National CRP Webinar
(Focus: Tips on report writing)

August



CRP Coordinator Peer Group
(Focus: Using data to support
your CRPs)

September



National CRP Webinar
(Focus: Father engagement
in case planning)