

Betsy Lerner Hello, I'm Betsy Lerner with the Capacity Building Center for States, and this is *A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare*, a podcast series by and about people with lived experience in child welfare and about their partnerships with leaders within child welfare agencies—partnerships that are aimed at improving child welfare systems. Our first episode will do some level-setting, and we'll introduce you to our co-hosts. They'll explain a little bit about what we hope you'll get out of listening to their conversations with people in these power-sharing partnerships. So, let me turn it over to Tony and Jamie.

Tony Parsons Testing 123.

Jamie Brooks Go for it, Tony, why don't you start?

Tony Parsons Well, hello, everybody, and welcome to this amazing podcast. My name is Tony Parsons. I have the great capacity of serving as a young adult consultant for the Capacity Building Center for States. As such, that means I do have lived child welfare experience. I was in the child welfare system for a little over 3 years, but really fun fact about me is I'm actually one of 24 children in my family. I love saying that because, even though I can't see your faces, I imagine a lot of jaws hit the ground just now. Twenty-two of us have spent time in the child welfare system, and so it's really great I can be here with my amazing friend and co-host, Jamie. And I'm going to turn things over to her, so she can introduce herself as well.

Jamie Brooks Hi, everyone. I'm Jamie Brooks. I am a family consultant with the Capacity Building Center for States, so I am a mom who was involved with child welfare with my own children, and, also, I am now a kinship provider for two family members, so, a lot. Both sides of the spectrum with the child welfare experience.

Tony Parsons I appreciate that, Jamie. So yeah, I bring the lived experience in child welfare for but also just a bunch of different systems perspectives as well, which I think is always helpful, you know, when we're talking about child welfare. Because to me when you hear "child welfare," it's not just the foster care system. There's so many other systems that touch the children, youth, and families that that system interacts with. And so, I'm very fortunate that I get to have some of that perspective as well. I can think of a time when I was, like, really scared of doing tailored service projects, which, for our listeners, if you're not familiar, tailored services is when you're doing something with a state agency or, like, a state group that really needs some assistance. And so for a long time, I was, like, I'm not good enough to be in that space.

So, I recently did a tailored service project with a state agency that I absolutely adore now, and it was really, really great to get to do that because they wanted to do youth engagement work, which is, like, something that I find to be so critical. I think the younger we can be engaging young people involved with welfare system, the better off we are as a system. And just the receptivity they had to all of the suggestions that we made, and it was such an iterative process that it totally allayed my fears of doing tailored services projects. And I had a really, really good time working with not only the staff itself on the agency but also the Center team that was a part of it. So I was, like, a late add. They're, like, "Oh, we need someone who knows youth engagement. Tony can do it." And so that was really fun experience for me to really see, you know, an agency saying, like, "We know we need support."

And, like, “we're going to go get that support” and, like, “here are the things that we're doing and, like, how can they be better,” right? Because they already, they just, like, they're doing good work. But if they know their practice can get better. And I think that everyone should be approaching child welfare with that frame. It's like, the work is good, but we can always be doing better. We can always be serving more children. We can always be helping more families. We can always be doing this in a better way. And so that mindset, to me, was just one of those really rewarding days to sit there and be, like, I'm really thankful I'm in this field of work. You know, people want to actively get better.

So it's a little bit of background professional about me in addition to my work with the Center, I also do work in Federal child welfare policy prior to taking on those sorts of roles that works in higher education advocacy as well as direct service. I actually was in the education space, like, what students for about 2 years, which is why I think I'm bald. You can't see that, which is probably for your benefit, but I'm a bald person, and I loved my middle schoolers, but I will always say that, like, you guys are the ones who made me go bald.

Yeah. So it's, like, me in a nutshell. How about you, Jamie?

Jamie Brooks Yeah, middle schoolers will do that to you, Tony, for sure. I have a few of my own. So for about 10 years, I worked in peer support, providing one-on-one support to parents involved in the system, and during that time also supported our local child welfare programs and agency to really help them, you know, change some policies and practices around improving parents' experience in the system, created some trainings and co-delivered those with our partner agency, so done some really great work I feel like supporting parents and the system. I think about a time in my work locally when we're, like, “This is a good idea. Let's have them partner with a supervisor at the agency and create a training and present it together.”

And I think sometimes when you're told to go and do it, like, you're gonna work with the parent partners, and you're gonna deliver a training and create it together, I worry about “Is that person really ready for what it means to really, really engage and partner with the parent partner?” And so that training ended up being amazing. And I think that supervisor in child welfare would say that it did change her perspective, “I'm working with people with lived expertise.” But you know, I think that happens a lot that people are told to go and do it, but they don't really understand what it's gonna mean. And so it was amazing. We were able to—we presented that training to hundreds of people in our state now, as a team of two parent partners and a supervisor at the agency, and so it's a support and accountability training. So it's a perfect balance around “The department's gonna hold you accountable,” but obviously it's lived experience people. We feel parents really need support. So how do you hold somebody accountable and support them at the same time? And so it was a really amazing sort of growing, I think, for both sides to process to come together and really share the space in the room in the power, it was amazing.

Tony Parsons I love that, I absolutely love that. You touched on another piece I want to take a couple minutes to explore. Just like you. You worried that the person didn't have what they needed to be in a place where they could actively participate and share that power. I love that you said that because I think sometimes we forget that power sharing no matter if you're a young person, a family, or parent, whatever that takes a certain level of skill. And I think everyone can get there, right? I definitely think it take some intentionality to, like, OK, you might not have these skills. What can we do, whatever capacity we're in to help you get there, right? I think that's some intentional work that we don't always talk

about and that's some intentional work that it is hard, that feeds me in such a way because I think that for us to get to where we are just personally is, like, someone recognized that we might not have at all. But then did that investment to be, like, I see your potential. I see that you can, let's work on these XYZ skills. You know, for, you know, like, I remember when I got into, like, the space now of, like, working on policy and working in that space. I had to make that transition from being, like, I'm an advocate. And I'm gonna tell my story and yada yada, which is great, and I'm happy to tell that story. And, like, I still do it, right.

But at some point, someone, like, "Tony, I want more for you than that. I want you to be in a position where you want more than that." And it took, like, a good year and a half for me to make that jump from, like, just advocate to the, like, no, I have skills now, like, you know. And so now, when I walk into these spaces, you know, this podcast, wherever, I walk in knowing I have skills to back up the story, it's no longer just my story. And I want that for everyone in the child welfare space. I want them to get to that point where there's no longer about their stories but about the skills they have. So I just stay outside, like, "Thank you for making that point," 'cause think that's huge.

Jamie Brooks Yeah, I think when we think about readiness, right, like, I don't, maybe it's just me or human nature, but when I'm told I'm gonna do something this way, and it's not necessarily my way, you know? That's hard. And so I think it's a challenge for anybody just to be told to go and do this with these people that you don't know much about, but you just know that they're parents who've been through the system, and you're gonna do this thing. And so I think it was really, you know, for that person, it was amazing that she was able to be at the table, and it never—there was never a moment where it felt like, she thought, "Well, I'm the person who actually knows what they're doing here, and we'll let you guys have a few lines." So it was a really, yeah, it was a really nice experience.

Tony Parsons And when you were working on that, you know, like, did things change, like, substantially when, like, that person was engaged because that's something I've noticed recently is, like, the more I do engagement type work with whomever that person is, right? Is, like, I might have a battle plan, and then I'll go in, and we'll do this. And, like, that did not end up the way I expected it. But, like, it's always better than what I was ever gonna come up with. Right, because we did. So just curious. Like, did things change when you did that?

Jamie Brooks You know, I think after that experience we've had such an amazing working relationship with that worker, and so we're able to go to her for so many other things, like just having that experience of hours together creating a training. We built a relationship where there was trust on both sides. We could really go to her later with concerns about cases or families, and the same for her. She wanted, she would come to us and ask for our help on things. So I think it gave us the opportunity to build a relationship in a way that just takes time, and we don't always have the opportunities to do it that way. So that was a really nice outcome of it, too.

Tony Parsons I love that you had such a strong relationship at the end of it because to me, I can do anything if I've got a strong relationship, working relationship with anybody, and, like, if I feel that you got my back professionally or otherwise, like, I will go to the ends of the earth to make sure I got your back. So I really I love that that happened.

Jamie Brooks Yeah, it was great. The trust, I think trust building was so important, and I think just getting to know each other, you know, on a personal level, a little bit goes so far to really, you know, create that trust, and you're able to go to that person in the future.

Tony Parsons Definitely. So now that we're kind of, like, now, you know who we are, and I hope that, you know, as we get to listen, you guys can give some feedback at some point, we'll get to know who our listeners are. But, you know, until then, you know, I kind of want to just kind of talk generally, you know, about why we're here, like, why are we doing a podcast? You know, but this is, like, why are we here, Jamie? Like, why, why do you think this is a good time for us to be having a podcast?

Jamie Brooks I mean, I think we really want to talk to the listeners about, you know, some things we've seen in child welfare and also, you know, how to bring in people with lived experience and how that can really change, you know, some outcomes for families, but also, you know, we've seen it affect workers in the system over the years. So really thinking about how to share power with people with lived experience in all aspects of the system.

Tony Parsons

Definitely. I think, I think that is so critical and just this idea of power sharing and bringing people together, right, because I don't know, I'd love your opinion on this, but when you hear things like power sharing, you know, to me that sounds almost like a buzzword, right? It's like, what does that fundamentally mean, right? Right. I'm gonna see how many ways I can weave power sharing into a paragraph, you know, and without ever really saying, like, what does that mean? How do you do it? You know, so I'm hoping similar to what you said, I'm really hoping that on this podcast, we not only discuss, like, what that is, but, like, how people are already doing it. Cuz I think in child welfare, we often forget, that there are people out there, there are organizations out there, right, that are doing really good work that we don't even get to highlight, you know. And so I know one of the things I'm super pumped for about this podcast is we'll have the opportunity to, like, invite people on to share with us some of the great work they do on power sharing and youth engagement and, like, lived expertise engagement, you know, and bringing in not only the young adult voice but also the parent voice, which I definitely feel gets left out of this conversation way too often, right. I mean, yeah, it's called child welfare, but, like, it's really family welfare, right? It's not just about kids and families, it's about parents. So I'm really excited for what this is gonna be, you know, but I think, I think we gotta talk about some of those terms that we're probably gonna use a lot.

Jamie Brooks Yeah. And I think some of the conversations and things, you know, we hear from our guests and that Tony and I may say may make people feel uncomfortable and a little bit like "Ooh," but hopefully it'll help you just think about new ways to, you know, integrate the lived experience in your work.

Tony Parsons But a note about the uncomfortability, I hope people will lean into that, right. You know, like growth should be uncomfortable. I remember being a lengthy, is lengthy word? langly, langly maybe?, I don't know, being a teenager and just having those uncomfortable growing pains. I honestly thought those would go away when I stopped growing and, like, they did physically. But I'm, like, wow, I feel these pains, like, emotionally, like, in the workplace all the time because, you know, you're never really supposed to stop growing. So I hope, listeners, that you're out there and you're hearing this, like, do not run away from the discomfort because I think you'll probably be better for it at the end, and, like,

you'll hear it in our voices, Jamie. And I'm sure, like, "Ooh, that made me feel some [unintelligible] away." Like, you know, we're on this journey with you all, so don't think that we, we aren't gonna do some growing on here. But, but yeah.

There are three key terms I think that we'll probably use a lot either I think we've used all of them actually today already, but I know we'll definitely probably come back to and those are "lived experience," "lived expertise," and "power sharing." These are, again, like, as I was saying, some of these kind of sound buzzworthy without no one ever discusses what they mean or what they are, how you do it, right. And so I know that's a really key focus of this podcast. It's really breaking that down. But I do think it's, as Jamie said, probably worth our time to kind of discuss what each of those things are.

And so let's start with "power sharing, you know." And as I conceptualize power sharing, it's this idea that we show mutual respect. We're including people, right, children, youth, families, everybody in this idea of a collaboration. We're moving towards something, and everyone has a stake in this. Everyone has power to make change and effect change.

It's not just one person who's been green lighting everything. We are all co-creating. That's another word, I would say that if we're gonna talk power sharing, you have to talk "co-creation," you know, because it's great to share power, but you're not moving that doing something with it. You're not really sharing power, in my opinion. And that will look a variety of ways, I think. Different agencies will do it differently. Different adults will do it differently. Parents, families, children, youth, whatever. But it's this idea that everyone at the table has decision-making authority, and everyone is moving together. And it's not, like, I am better than you, or you're above me. It's like, the idea to me at first among equals, maybe, but we're all equals, right.

I don't know, Jamie. That's how I think about power sharing. I don't know if, if, if that jives with what you think it is.

Jamie Brooks Yeah, I love that. I love really, you know, thinking a lot about the mutual respect and really just authentic, you know, use of the person's experience and, and change, so there's real opportunities and support to bring the people to the table.

Tony Parsons 100 percent, 100 percent.

Umm. And so let's talk now, like, "lived experience," I think that one might be one that people are very well, you know, familiar with probably because you hear that a lot of child welfare, right. And so for our purposes when we're talking about "lived experience," it probably be fair to say it's like the representation or understanding of, you know, an individual's experience. It's like, you know, understanding they have those experiences that have brought them here. And when they show up, that has influence on their knowledge, their skills, the way that they show up. Right. It's just valuing the fact that, "Hey, you've lived life. And because of the life that you've lived, you probably have insights that other people don't have." And I think this podcast is really great because you have the young adults' experience, and you have a, a parent experience. And I think those are two experiences that are very similar, but also very unique. And so I'm really thankful that, like, we're co-hosting this together because we'll have different experiences. But I think that will make the conversational richer for having them.

Jamie Brooks Yeah. Absolutely. I think, you know, being able to have all the perspectives is so necessary. You can't have one without the other, so.

Tony Parsons Exactly. I love they can't have one without the other. That's exactly right. And then "lived expertise." Now this one gets interchanged, at least in my work. And Jamie, correct me if I'm wrong, I don't know how it might be with the work you do, but, like, I often hear "lived experience" and "lived expertise" used interchangeably, but I think they're different. I do think there's a subtle but important difference between the two of those. And so when it comes to "lived expertise," it's taking it a step beyond "lived experience," right?

Jamie Brooks Yeah. And I would add, too, like, the difference really is people with lived experiences—everybody has lived experiences. And I think "lived expertise," you know, are really people who have learned how to use that experience and give voice to it in ways that other people will hear. So there's been a lot of probably training or experiences and sitting at tables and being places where they can use that voice. And so they really have learned how to lead that way.

Tony Parsons Oh yeah, exactly. That's exactly right. You know, we're really hoping to do some meaningful engagement here, you know, with people with that lived experience, industry leaders, whatever the case may be. And so I think it's also really important to kind of talk about what "meaningful engagement" is, you know. And Jamie, I would love your thoughts about that because I think it looks a little bit different. When I think of meaningful engagement, you know, especially on the young person's side, you know, though, I'm 28, so I don't know if I'm young anymore, I feel like I'm old. I wake up every day and my back hurts. I eat Raisin Bran for breakfast. But I think it's important to talk about meaningful engagement. So I've really, I would really love it from your perspective. What does that mean for us, like, for, for our populations?

Jamie Brooks I mean, I think there's a whole spectrum, right, of ways that families and young adults and youth can be brought in, and I think there's everything from informing, which is really just providing information, right, like you give them information you may leave, and you're not really know, like, how that's gonna influence a policy or practice all the way to empowering people that are really be the decision-makers, have authority, people with lived experience being the ones to make decisions, deliver the trainings, develop the trainings really, and just bring their expertise and education to the table, and be able to provide the training, and be in those positions, they're hired on as staff and really, like, expert in their position, just like anybody else.

Tony Parsons When I talk to people who are, like, younger, they often say, like, "Well, you were just checking the box. Like, I showed up to this meeting. I got to sit in it, but I didn't speak at all." But, you know, someone might check the box and say there was engagement there. Right. And to me, that is so, like, symbolic. I think it's the word I want to use. That is such a symbolic way of doing it, where we're not really moving the needle, right, until there's that empowerment, where you walk out of that meeting feeling like, "I was a full participant. I got to have input, like, substantive input on things. And I feel like I'm gonna have my decisions, like, incorporated or my thoughts and words, like, you know, acted upon."

You know, I think those levels of participation almost, you know, are so critical that agencies, staff, whomever you are, no matter what your position is in child welfare, you can lead from where you are. You need to ensure that you are empowering the people that you're working with. I think that everyone can participate, everyone can empower. And you know, it's not gonna happen overnight, right? A lot of this work is gonna take a lot. It's gonna take a long time, and it should. Like, engagement is hard. It's supposed to be hard, anything worth having is worth waiting for. If we're gonna get to a place where

we're truly doing engagement work, like, I'm comfortable letting it take some time as long as we're continuing to move it.

Jamie Brooks

I think a couple of the things that I'm really hoping people will get out of listening to this podcast, too, are, like, you know, whoever's in the position of making decisions in child welfare agencies will really see how bringing people with lived experience is essential, really, for improving the system. There's no other, really, way to know what people need. It's up to us to ask them, and they know, and they will be able to tell you. And so hopefully, they'll have some understanding around what meaningful engagement looks like. We can get some ideas on how to share and receive power, make decisions, improve the system. I think those are, there's so many ways, and it's gonna be exciting to hear the different ways that that's been successful for people. And really seeing the connection between meaningful engagement with people with lived experience and advancing racial equality equity, I think that's such an important point in child welfare right now. So I think that's a lot of what we hope that people will take from this.

Tony Parsons Oh yeah. I mean, big time. I think in societal discussion in general, you know. I really hope people will take that away from here just, like, how can we do that in a racially equitable way, you know, and not just racially, just in general equitable, right. Like, how does this look for different minorities, different, you know, LGBT groups? There are so many considerations that go into this. And I know there are people out there who understand this, who do that work. And so I'm really excited, you know, to be on here and to be able to start, like, highlighting some of those voices. Because I think that the child welfare system does a lot of things really well and a lot of things not very well, I'll be the first to be critical of it, right? But at the same time, the more peer learning we can do to lift up what's working, I think that will help so, so, so much.

Jamie Brooks What I've seen with families is, like, they're just wanna be listened to, right. Like, I think people want to share their experience and story. And if you take the time to listen to that, you'll really be able to pull out some of the things that could help them make some changes. So it's right there for us to take. We just have to take the time to listen. So I really would love to see the system have more opportunity to really just engage with people by sitting and listening and hearing their story.

Tony Parsons What I wish the system would do, or just be a little bit better about or just be more intentional about, right, is when we're rolling out policies or solutions, we're doing it in a way that actually is equitable, right? Like, it's great that we talk a big game, but I think that we sometimes forget it's like, yeah, I can only speak from my experience, right, as an African American man, we work with families that are so racially diverse, and I want the child welfare system to do some real community healing. That's really what I would like. I would love for us to get to a point where it's, like, a community welfare system, you know, like, why is your community experiencing this, such that you are now in this situation? I just feel like, we don't do that, like, are we ever really gonna address the problem, like, if we're only treating the symptoms and never the root causes, right? Are we ever actually gonna fix it? I don't know. It's a very deep philosophical question. I didn't mean to get all philosophical on you, but, like, that's what I want. That's what I hope the child welfare system could do differently is, like, let's start treating root causes. Let's really do that intentional work to treat root causes of, like, why do children enter the child care system? Why do we believe children need to be removed from their home? And I'm

thankful that we have things like family first that are kind of starting to, like, change that for us. But I still think we've had a bit of a ways to go, you know, to see that fully reaches potential, I would say.

Jamie Brooks Yeah, I love that. I think I've seen, you know, we've seen families just be confused about why they're involved, and really just if we could become more familiar with the issues that they're facing, I think, you know, we could really come up with some creative outside-the-box ways to help them rather than remove children. So I love the prevention stuff that's happening, too.

Tony Parsons Yeah. And it just gives, like, how far up can we go, though? I think that's also the other question.

Jamie Brooks Umm.

Tony Parsons You know, at some point, we can't go all the way upstream. I mean, I think child welfare is the one field where everyone wants to work themselves out of a job, right? We all want to get to a place where children using families don't need the kind of supports that we offer, right? That's what we want, every child in every home, every family having what they need. But, like, I always wonder, like, I wanna go further upstream than we are. And so, Jamie, what is, like, one thing that you, you've taken away from today?

Jamie Brooks I mean, I think just hearing your experiences with your work with the Center is amazing, that you were empowered to be more than just your story, right? Like, you can bring so much of yourself and experiences to improving the system without having to share every detail of your story. And so I love that. What would you say, Tony, maybe is something that you took from today?

Tony Parsons Yeah, I, I think one of the greatest things I'm gonna take away from today is just this idea of, like, people are doing good work in the field. And we are now going to be doing some intentional work to ensure that people get to hear that. And whether they are doing great work along youth engagement, family engagement, race equity—the good people are out there doing the good work and we get to talk about that.

Jamie Brooks Umm.

Tony Parsons I am jazzed to do that. I am so pumped up again. And guess what? I'm very pumped that we're gonna be on this journey together. And I wish people could, like, see our faces because, like, I love the smiles that we have. That's another thing y'all can't see it, but we've got beautiful smiles here. Hashtag team beautiful smile.

Jamie Brooks Yeah. And I'm just looking forward to having amazing conversations with people who have been doing this work, how they've done it. It's difficult, right? So ways they've really found to overcome some barriers and do great work with people with lived experience and look forward to hearing all those great strategies they have, so.

Betsy Lerner So that's it for the first episode of our podcast series, *A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare*. We hope you'll come back again to hear Tony and Jamie talk to people with lived experience and their agency leader partners. You'll hear from agency leaders about how they've strengthened their workforce by hiring people with lived experience. How applying lived expertise in planning and decision-making for things like training, developing CFSR PIPs and FFPSA prevention plans

Capacity Building Center for States: *A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare* Episode01

can lead to more effective, targeted, and realistic solutions and, ultimately, to improved outcomes for families, youth, and children.

So thanks for listening. And we'll see you next time!

This podcast was created by the Capacity Building Center for States under Contract No. HHSP233201500071I, funded by the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The opinions expressed by individuals quoted do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Children's Bureau.