

Capacity Building Center for States Podcast  
HOW WE PARTNER WITH THE COMMUNITY TO IMPROVE SERVICE OPTIONS  
1: Series Introduction: Framework for Change and the Leadership Role  
TRANSCRIPT

**NARRATOR** [00:06]: Welcome to the podcast series “How We Partner With the Community to Improve Service Options”. I’m Betsy Lerner, and I work for The Capacity Building Center for States. The Center is part of the Children’s Bureau’s Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative, and we help agencies build their capacity to improve child welfare practice. At the Center, we know agencies are always working to find ways to better support the families and communities they serve. But we were curious: As an agency works to develop a more collaborative service array – one that is responsive to families and youth – what strategies are helping them change their organizational culture to put families at the center of their work? As I talked to people in the child welfare community, a few themes emerged. In this episode, we’ll be talking about creating a framework for change and the role of leaders.

**NARRATOR** [01:07]: Child welfare agencies serve as a hub for the larger system serving children, youth, and families. To meet prevention goals, changes must also happen within communities as agencies collaborate with stakeholders that affect the lives of families in their communities every day, including legal and judicial entities, and public and private service providers. At the Center, we wanted to learn more about how leaders in child welfare have navigated some of these changes to create a culture that supports a collaborative service array development. So I visited two child welfare agencies to find out what they are doing to reshape their child welfare systems and create a common vision with their partners.

[01:45]: [Airport announcement sound]:

[01:55]: [Staff person answering phone with agency’s name]:

**NARRATOR** [01:59]: First, I traveled to Frankfort, Kentucky to speak with Eric Clark, the commissioner for the Department for Community Based Services, and asked him about the steps his state is taking in to bring about change and the impact of leadership.

**ERIC CLARK** [02:12]: When I came down to this position, in my conversation with the governor, who appointed me, one of the things he charged me to do that I hold on to--almost every day I remind myself of it--he told me, listen to the voices. Listen to what people are talking about. And I take that to heart.

[02:27]: And that has led to our three transformational goals. They're not in rank order in child welfare transformation, but they all complement each other, one being safely reduce the number of kids in out-of-home care. We have over 9,700 children in foster care setting in Kentucky. That's far too high. And it stresses caseloads, and it just gums up the system. Kids linger too long. We don't have the bandwidth to address it in full.

[02:57]: So goal number two is to reduce caseloads, which we know is important to our workforce. If they are equipped to have a more manageable caseload, we think that that will build morale. It'll build

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retention, and it will help them be more of what they're trained to be, which is a social worker, rather than a case manager. Because they're dealing with crisis all the time, at this point.

[03:17]: The third transformational goal we have is to increase timeliness to appropriate permanency. When I talk about this goal, I share one data set, and then I focus on that word appropriate. It takes, right now, statewide in Kentucky, an average child in foster care 3 years, 36 months, to be adopted. That's too long, that you're in foster care far too long to get your appropriate permanency.

**NARRATOR** [03:43]: I spoke to several other people in Kentucky that day—you'll hear from them a little later. It's pretty evident that everybody knows what the transformational goals are. So, the vision for where the agency is moving is something everybody understands. With the goals clearly delineated, I asked the Commissioner to elaborate on how his agency is changing to meet them.

**ERIC CLARK** [04:03]: What we're trying to do in Kentucky is re-brand and redefine who we are. For far too long, we have worked in isolation a bit. And it just hasn't worked. We have record number of kids in foster care right now, a lot of challenges to our system, a lot of challenges for our workforce. So, we need to change how we operate.

[04:28]: We've had a lot of focus on child welfare in Kentucky in the past couple of years. Just over a year ago, the Department for Community Based Services initiated its own child welfare transformation initiative, which was our agency taking our child welfare system--child welfare agency, I should say--in full, putting it on the table, and evaluating what are our strengths? What are our weaknesses? Where are the gaps? Where can we improve? Where do we need help?

[04:56]: This initiative is under a formal project management structure. We have stakeholder engagement. We have a steering committee. We have nine work groups that consist of everything from workforce supports to fiscal modernization to technology resources, foster care and adoption, et cetera. The members of those work groups consist of our representatives of our agency. They also include foster parents, foster youth, community partners, private providers, behavioral health professionals within this cabinet for Health and Family Services, public health officials, et cetera. So, we have gone a year into this, done tremendous work in building partnerships across government agencies, as well as with communities and providers across the state.

[05:50]: Many of the people I've surrounded myself with have come from the field. So they bring respect, because the field knows them. And that's just been one of my big approaches, is surrounding myself around competent people that can give me good advice. We can lead together.

**NARRATOR** [06:09]: Commissioner Clark raised an important point, that you can't do the work alone-- leadership is something that works best when it is shared. I had a chance to talk with many of these

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individuals who lead alongside him, Jennifer Warren, an executive advisor in the Commissioner's office, is one of them.

**JENNIFER WARREN:** [06:27]: The thing that you're going to hear over and over again--if you have been listening, you're hearing it embedded. It's that child welfare belongs to all of us. And it isn't about our agency. It's about the system. And when we talk about who's championing the changes, that conversation starts with leadership, but it's rolling.

[06:41]: And when we're talking about implementing change and who's going to drive that conversation, it really is specific to that conversation. And everyone has--they have a voice in it. It's hard to say just one person. But I will say, we have a leader--the commissioner--he is out front. He's not waiting for anyone to tell him what to do. We're all having this conversation and he's saying let's go do it.

**ERIC CLARK** [07:21]: Yeah, I will share another thing, a big initiative that I'm all in on in Kentucky, is we are working with the Collaborative Safety Institute to incorporate a culture of safety here in Kentucky, which is incorporating aspects of safety science, that is used in other industries, into child welfare work. Aviation, for example, nuclear power, different aspects of the health care delivery system, uses safety science. And what those industries recognize is we're in some high volatile work here, and there are some things that can really go wrong.

[08:08]: And we've got to do a better job in child welfare of recognizing the volatility that we work in. We're dealing with abuse and neglect, families in crisis, domestic violence. And these things don't have office hours. These things are 2 o'clock on a Saturday morning, and you're going out, in some places in rural Kentucky, off the grid, having no idea what you're walking into.

[08:35]: And what the culture of safety does is looks, focuses, on systems designs, human factors assessment, in these type of incidences, that when a critical incident occurs--and that's another thing you acknowledge, is they do occur--when they do, how do we respond? How do we respond as leaders of an agency, an agency in full? How does the community respond? How do other government officials respond? How does the media respond?

[09:06]: And unfortunately, what we have in Kentucky that we're working on--and I would dare to say in probably most other jurisdictions across the state, or across the country--is a culture of fear and a culture of blame. And when a critical incident occurs, it's a review to see if all policy and procedures were followed. And when they weren't, there's the reason why this happened. And someone is going to be blamed for that. Someone is going to be, I call them, outed. They could be put in the paper. They could be sued in their personal capacity. But someone's going to get the finger pointed at them for this incident.

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[09:51]: Culture of safety changes that, turns it all on its head, and draws individuals in to inform the system and the people who are looking at this in a safe way, to let us know, do we need to re-evaluate how we're operating here? Is there a lack of resources? Is there training required? What led to this? Because another aspect of this work is genuinely, no one wakes up every morning with the intent of producing a bad outcome in someone's life. But it happens.

[10:22]: So how do we allow individuals to grieve? How do we allow individuals to come alongside and share their story and their perspective in a respectful way, without fear of being blamed or retaliated against? Certainly, this does not take accountability off the table. It holds the system accountable, and it certainly shows--or holds individuals accountable. But it's the right approach to accountability.

[10:51]: And we're not going to get any better by outing people in their individual capacities, if we don't hold ourselves and our systems accountable. So, we are very excited about this work in Kentucky. Our workforce very much is, more than anything, they're loving this right now. They feel empowered. They feel supported.

[11:11]: They feel that, for perhaps the first time that their Commissioner and their leadership will get up and advocate for them in a real way, that these incidents don't define who we are. We grieve alongside of these incidents. This is not what we're about. Certainly, they happen, and we regret that, and we're committed to making things better.

[11:34]: And you're willing to make the right decisions. One of the things we know about this culture of fear and blame--and some of the states that have done the culture of safety work in their child welfare areas have seen a decrease in their children entering into care. They've started to see a retention among their workforce. Because right now, in this culture of fear and blame, the easy decision--perhaps not the right decision, but the easy decision is just to remove a child from their home. Because then I can go home with a clean conscience. I can control that situation, and there's nothing--I'm not going to be outed if something bad happens.

[12:13]: But that's not always the right approach. Perhaps the difficult but right decision is to see, how can we engage the community in a way to come alongside this family and remove this risk or this safety concern, to keep that family together and thriving? Because we also know that sometimes, perhaps even often times, the decision to remove a child from a home can cut a wound far deeper than what we're looking to address in that home that led to the removal.

**NARRATOR** [12:49]: Here's Jennifer Warren again.

**JENNIFER WARREN** [12:50]: Up here in central office, you can lose your perspective. And you have to have your thumb on the pulse. And the way you do that is you interact with staff. And so, we've gone

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around to all nine regions. And we've introduced them. It's very important to us that the staff understand what transformation is and what it is not. That it is not something that's going to just go away. This is really about everything that we've wanted to do we get the opportunity to do that.

[13:24]: So getting back to the basics of even just understanding the challenges of the field. And those are real time walking into families. That's happening. As you and I sit here talking, there is a 20-something worker knocking on the door of a home that she has no idea what is on the other side of that, or he has no idea. And we want to be able to give them the tools to do the job very well, that they can be proud of and feel safe about the work they're doing.

[13:52]: [Car door slamming sound]:

**NARRATOR** [13:56: I also traveled to Washington, D.C., where I spent the day talking with representatives of District of Columbia Child & Family Services Agency and many of their collaborative partners. They shared with me how they are working together to create the shift towards preventative services. I sat down with a couple of the people on CFSA's executive team to ask them about the role of leadership in changing the culture and direction of their system.

**ROBERT MATTHEWS** [14:20]: Robert L. Matthews, Deputy Director for Entry Services, providing oversight for child protective services.

[14:27]: Leadership is definitely important. And one of the things I can say, and I think Natalie can speak to it as well, is through this process of developing our prevention plan is that our director has been at the forefront.

**NARRATOR** [14:40]: "Natalie" is Natalie Craver, you'll hear from her in just a second. Their director is Brenda Donald, and I should say a quick word about her. She returned to DC CFSA as its director for the second time in January 2017. Her first stint as director was from January 2012 to December 2015, and she is widely credited with accelerating the District's ongoing child welfare reform and establishing a host of performance improvements, including a reduction in the number of children in foster care.

**ROBERT MATTHEWS** [15:10]: She's sat in the chair. And through many, many months of planning, she's been there.

[15:17]: And that's an important element to have that I know across the country and some of my colleagues don't have because, ultimately, sometimes this particular role has been delegated out to someone else. But the directors here saw that it was so important that she be at the forefront leading this effort. And it was also important and symbolic to the community. Our director has served in a number of roles. She's been deputy mayor for Health and Human Services which provides leadership to

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the largest cluster pretty much of government in Washington DC. So, with having that level of capital built in, her voice resonates to others.

[15:59]: And so the interesting thing that I saw through this process of bringing in all of the partners that were part of the planning process is that, from beginning to end, everybody stayed at the table. It wasn't a drop off in mid-course. Everyone stayed engaged because I believe the message upfront was very clear and concise as to where we were trying to go. And then everyone bought in because everyone saw their role and saw what they can contribute to this process.

[16:31]: Now what I believe that the director has also built in, whether she's here or not, is she has built in that message and has built in the force behind what we're trying to accomplish. This is what DC believes we should be doing it for our children and families. This is something we believe we need to do because we've taken the time to really thoughtfully think about what's needed, what supports are needed.

[17:00]: It's important for leaders to lead, and it's important for leaders to be at the forefront. And it's also important for leaders to delegate and have others lead the message. As you can see today, me and Natalie are having this conversation with you because our leaders trust that we're going to carry the message and be able to articulate it in a way where it can be helpful to others.

**NATALIE CRAVER** [17:22]: Natalie Craver, Program Manager for the Community Partnerships Administration, supervising and overseeing our community-based partners and prevention activities.

[17:30]: I completely agree with everything Robert said. I'd only add that, as someone who actually joined CFSA about eight months ago, I'm fairly new to the organization. But as someone who has been dropped into the culture of an organization, I have felt everything Robert has said as an employee getting to know the culture of CFSA and understand our four pillars and feeling from day one because I came here to be a part of implementing Family First and to work with our community-based organizations that the director's leadership and her vision and her really clear perspective on how DC's prevention services continuum will work and is designed to work and how sister agencies feel really clear about how they partner with us and the opportunity and the creativity that's afforded in thinking about how do we serve families better.

[18:17]: That's something that I've felt everyday working at CFSA and think that that's such a huge part of leadership--that ability to create a space where within government we can be creative and we can think about how to work together and blow up something that isn't working and to reinvent it and to not be stuck in the way things have always been done but think about what can we do within our limits as stewards of government resources to really help and to really leverage our community partners to do that work.

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[18:38]: And that's I think such a really critical piece of leadership that I've seen in CFSA and think that that's a part of how every deputy within the organization has been charged to think about their work. And I've really appreciated being a part of it.

**NARRATOR** [19:04]: As we kept talking about the culture of CFSA, it was clear that the four pillars that Natalie had mentioned was a large part of establishing a framework and an approach to working with families. So, I asked Robert to tell me about where that came from.

**ROBERT MATTHEWS** [19:19]: Probably back in 2012, Director Donald came up with an idea. And it was something that was greatly needed at this agency in terms of providing some type of foundational strategic framework for an agency that really spoke to what our principles and values should be for families. But not only that, but what should our principles and values be for practice?

[19:42]: When you think about the four pillars, with the first pillar being narrowing the front door, what that means is that we do not want to unnecessarily remove children. But we remove them when it's absolutely necessary, when there is imminent harm or threats to their safety. The second pillar is temporary safe haven. And what that means is, when we do have to separate a child from their parent or from their family, that we don't want foster care to be an experience where you hear so many horror stories. We want the experience to be just what is--temporary, because we want to be able to reunify you with your parent, but we also want to make sure that your placement, whether it's with the kinship or whether it's with a traditional family setting, that it's safe and that it's also meeting your needs.

[20:28]: Our third pillar is around well-being. We have a number of youth who may have mental or behavioral health challenges that we want to ensure that, while they're in our care, we provide those supports necessary. We want to make sure that they are continuing to achieve educational attainment, that they're able to go to school, make good grades. And hey, even if they need assistance, there's mentoring available.

[20:51]: And then the last pillar is exiting to permanency. And so, in the likelihood where reunification is not or may not happen, there's adoption and guardianship. So, going through each pillar helps guide a worker's practice. But the interesting thing is you can go to a law enforcement officer. You can go to a mental health specialist. You can go to anyone at DC Health. You can go to anyone in the community.

[21:16]: They understand and know what the four pillars are, which is important because we're just, as our director say, the child welfare agency. We're not the system. So, the system has to understand what our approach and what our principles and values are. They have to share that approach as they work with us to work with the most vulnerable children and families in the district.

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**NARRATOR** [21:37]: We're sure that becoming a better steward of the children and families in your state is a top priority for you and your agency. Change starts at the top, and strong leaders can establish a shared vision and can model and support the changes they want to see. You've heard how Kentucky and DC are doing this, using a clear framework, supporting a safety culture, creating safe spaces for their workforce, and demonstrating committed leadership to reshape their systems to becoming more family focused. With a specific and actionable plan and strong leadership that will advocate for those in the field, your agency can bring prevention-focused change to fruition in a huge way.

[22:20]: Thanks for listening to the first episode of the podcast series How We Partner With the Community to Improve Service Options. I hope it's left you inspired and sparked ideas that you can put into practice at your agency.

[22:33]: Listen on for a brief snippet from the next episode: Starting and Sustaining Collaborative Partnerships. Until next time.

**ROBERT MATTHEWS** [22:44]: We may not get everything we want. The provider may not get everything they want. But you can meet in the middle and make some compromises. And that's the beauty of a partnership. That's really the beauty of family. Who gets everything that they want? No one does that. And so, I would really, really urge those who are just beginning this work to think about some of those particular first steps in trying to build their community service array.

[23:09]: [Music]

**NARRATOR** [23:12]: This podcast was created by the Capacity Building Center for States funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau under contract number HHSP233201400033C.