Webinar Series

*Parents as Changemakers*

Presenters: Elizabeth Kramer, ICF
Marissa Sanders, North American Council on Adoptable Children

Elizabeth Kramer: Hello, and thank you for joining us. Today's webinar is brought to you by Child Welfare Information Gateway, the information dissemination service for the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

My name is Elizabeth Kramer, and I am the senior manager for knowledge transfer and information management at Child Welfare Information Gateway. This webinar is one of several that we are offering virtually to help ensure that critical information is shared with child welfare and related professionals, foster families, adoptive families, and adoptive persons during the COVID-19 pandemic when we are prevented from gathering in person and challenged to continue to work with children and families in new and innovative ways.

Today's presentation was originally scheduled as a break-out session for the National Foster Parent Association annual conference.

Just a few housekeeping notes. We are recording today's webinar, and we'll be making this recording available on our website at www.childwelfare.gov. It also will be made available on the National Foster Parent Association website. All of our participant phone lines are muted at this time, and we ask that you submit any questions that you have in the
Q&A box. We will answer questions at the end of the presentation. At the end of the webinar, you also will receive a link to a short survey. We ask that you please provide us with your feedback on this webinar.

Now I'm very excited to introduce our session today: "Parents as Changemakers--Effective Policy Advocacy." Our speaker today is Marissa Sanders. Marissa is a consultant to the North American Council on Adoptable Children and is the director of the West Virginia Foster Adoptive Kinship Parents Network. So, Marissa, now I'm gonna go ahead and turn it over to you.

Marissa Sanders: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm so excited to be here and to share with you all about advocacy and, in particular, policy advocacy. As Elizabeth mentioned, I am a consultant with North American Council on Adoptable Children. I'm also a state partner for CHAMPS, which you'll hear about in a minute--you'll meet amazing parents--and the director of our state foster parent association, which is the Foster Adoptive and Kinship Parents Network.

Before I started the network here, which was just a couple year--not even quite 2 years ago, I worked in disability rights for 20 years and did a whole lot of advocacy at the local, regional, state, and federal levels. So, um...so I have a lot of background working in especially policy advocacy, and I'm excited to share some strategies and ideas and hear kind of what you all are hoping to learn or gain.

So as you can see on this first slide, if you can comment in the Q&A where you either currently are doing or hope to do the most advocacy. So if you're looking at the legislature or child welfare agency or maybe even it could be the national level or if you're looking more at individual cases, it's helpful for me to know where everybody's coming from and then also something that you're hoping to learn today. And I don't know if I will be able to see those answers...or Elizabeth will
tell me.

So I'm really excited to be here. And CHAMPS, again, stands for Children Need Amazing Parents. It's a national campaign to ensure bright futures for kids in foster care by promoting the highest quality parenting. The goal of CHAMPS is to spur some policy reforms around child welfare and foster care in 20 to 25 states over 5 years by prioritizing quality foster parenting and ensuring that foster parents are equipped with training and support to help children heal, grow, and flourish.

So one of the ways that they do that is by partnering with several states organizations, including mine in West Virginia and some other states, and then also by working with several national partners, which includes the North American Council on Adoptable Children and several others including the National Foster Parent Association.

Elizabeth Kramer: So, Marissa, we do have some comments about what people are hoping to learn. We've got someone who'd like to help advocate for birth parents working towards reunification, someone that is hoping to streamline the ICPC process, noting that invisible borders between states sometimes create unnecessary delays and compel case workers to place children much further away from home communities than necessary. We've got someone here from a child welfare agency that hopes to learn different ways to communicate with foster parents. We've got somebody here from the great state of South Carolina. And somebody mentioning that they would like to advocate--or they envision themselves advocating primarily at the agency level as well as in individual cases.

Marissa Sanders: OK, great. Thank you. That's really helpful.

Elizabeth Kramer: Sure!
Marissa Sanders: So a little more background on CHAMPS. There are 6 policy priorities that CHAMPS is really working towards. The first is supporting relationships between birth and foster families. Second one is implementing data-driven recruitment and retention practices. So really looking at how can we use data and even gather more data so that we can effectively recruit and retain our foster parents. Third--engaging foster parents in decision making, and we'll talk more about that one and the next one, and we'll use some of those for examples as we go forward, but providing timely access to trusted, dedicated staff and peer support to foster parents. And then also prioritizing placement with family members and other family connections and ensuring timely access to physical and mental health services.

So those are just kind of the policy goals that CHAMPS has set and has worked toward. And there's a great--at the end of the presentation, there's a link--it's fosteringchamps.org--and there's a great policy playbook that they have developed and put together that has lots of recommendations and examples of where these types of policies are effective in different states and jurisdictions. So I'd recommend that as a really useful resource.

Um...so talking a little bit more about engaging foster parents in decision making. Foster parents have valuable information about the child that no one else has. And I know most of you know that. I'm preaching to the choir here, but, um...and that information, obviously, is important to courts and agencies, so some of the recommendations that CHAMPS would make are to, um...to make sure that policy is clear, that foster parents need to be engaged in part of the process to ensure that they're at the table and their voice is valued as part of that process and that they're included in the team meetings, and even in policy levels.
So an example would be foster parent advisory boards can be a way to involve foster parents in policy decision making as long as they are really heard and valued and part of the process and not just--sometimes jurisdictions will create advisory boards and then not really take their recommendations. So you want to make sure that you're taking those recommendations seriously. And then--whoops. I'm gonna...and then, also, of course, involving them in the case planning and...because that leads to increased foster parent satisfaction. And people tend to foster longer when they feel involved and heard.

And then the other one that we'll highlight a little bit more today is providing timely access to trusted staff and peer support. So, again, most of you are gonna be familiar with this, but foster parents commonly report that the single-most important factor in their ability to care for children is the ability to connect with someone they trust to discuss how to best meet the needs of the children in their care. In my state, that often means finding other foster parents or kinship parents that they can talk to. Because of the kind of the power dynamic that can be set up between workers and foster parents, we find that foster parents will share a lot more and a lot more openly with other people who are in the same position. So that's been a really big push here in our state is to make sure that we're providing ways for people to have peer support. And we know that that, again, is--support for foster parents is tied to retention and to decreased placement failure. And so policy really needs to make sure that foster parents have access to that support and can get it quickly.

So a couple different recommendations and things that CHAMPS has included in their playbook--some states or jurisdictions hire foster parents, certified foster parents to provide that kind of support. Others provide funding to state associations so that they can establish those kinds of things.
Sometimes they'll use dedicated agency case workers to support families. And then there's also phone support, and kinship navigators are other examples of that type of support.

So I'm gonna try to do a little poll here. I'm gonna ask you to comment in the Q&A. What do you think advocacy is? Is it talking with a case worker about a challenge that you're experiencing? Is it sharing concerns or ideas at a meeting with state or county officials? Calling or emailing legislators about issues? Writing an op-ed about foster parent needs? Or, "E," all of the above? So if you can just comment a letter in the Q&A, I'll be able to see most of those or... and I can see them, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Kramer: Great. You're seeing a lot of "E"s, then, huh?

Marissa Sanders: Yeah. Yes. Ha! Everyone is saying "E," and you are correct--it is "all of the above." Sometimes people think that it's only going to the capitol and talking to legislators or only writing letters to officials or something like that. And really, advocacy is raising your voice, right. It's talking about what you need. It's asking for something from someone so that you can get what you need. So with my 4-year-old son, who by the way may show up--so just as a heads up--his form of advocacy has become chanting what he needs. I think he spent too much time at the capitol with his mother. Ha ha ha! But that can be a form of advocacy, and we'll talk about that as well. So there's lots of different ways to advocate for your needs, and sometimes people feel kind of overwhelmed and scared of advocacy for a lot of different reasons. So if that's you, feel free to comment in the Q&A something that scares you or makes you feel overwhelmed when it comes to doing policy or systems advocacy. But instead of thinking it's this big thing that sometimes feels overwhelming and scary, I'd like you to take just a minute and think about a time when you were nervous to make a request but you made it anyway and you got whatever it is, what you were requesting.
So for example, when I think about this, one of the things that comes to mind is when I was a teenager, and I decided to ask my parents to give me the money that they were spending on things like shampoo and clothes and the toiletries and things because I didn't like what they were buying me. So I talked them into giving me the money so that I could learn how to budget and I could do all these different things. And I was really nervous to make that request. But then think about what made you, what made that request successful for you. So in my case, what made it successful was that I sat down and thought about it from their perspective and how it would benefit them--meant they didn't have to do as much shopping--and also how it would benefit me. You know, here's all the lessons I'm gonna learn. I'm gonna learn how to budget. I'll learn how to save. I'll learn how to select the most affordable or the best option.

So doing some research, thinking about your audience are all things that may have made your request successful when you were maybe nervous to do it, but you were still successful. So all of those skills that you use when you're requesting something are advocacy skills. So you've all done advocacy. If you're a foster parent, you've done advocacy on a pretty regular basis even if it doesn't feel like it. So don't let advocacy be a big, scary, overwhelming thing for you.

Oh, there we go. My slide wasn't wanting to advance. So advocacy 101. Your voice matters. You can make a big difference, not only in the lives of children in your home but also in the way that our state or your county or jurisdiction or even our nation approaches child welfare and foster care and caring for kids who are not with their biological parents and how we approach reunification and all of those other topics that people mention. Stories and sharing experiences are usually our best advocacy tools, so we will talk at the end of the presentation today about strategies for doing that specifically. The bottom
line is, the policymakers can't fix what they don't know about, and they don't know about it if they don't hear about it from you. If you're a foster parent joining us today, you are on the front lines, so they need to hear your experiences. And I'll tell you briefly that when I started doing this, I started the organization just as our legislative session was starting in 2019. And the first time I started talking to legislators, they all were just shocked. "You're a foster parent? Boy, we nev--we haven't heard from foster parents." That was sort of the new thing for them. They'd heard from lots of other people in the system, but not so much from foster parents. So that was really important and they really valued our voice because of that. So as you venture into systems and policy advocacy, think about your partners and your roles. There's different ways to do what I call system advocacy, which is sometimes policy and sometimes other decisions that are less formal but still part of how we do things as a system. There are different roles involved in that, and when you're working with others, it's important to think about kind of who's working on it, what they're doing, but also what you want your role to be.

So the 3 roles--there's lots of different ways to look at this, but the 3 ways that I usually look at it are, there's an advocate, an activist, and a strategist. And we'll talk about each of those here. The advocates make up the army. So they're your huge number of people. They're interested in and monitor several issues at once. So they might be looking at child welfare but also education or the environment or the economy or poverty issues or something that may or may not be rated. They provide the power in numbers, and they prove to policymakers that this community really cares about whatever this issue is. So what they do is they represent the grassroots. This is where you're getting your foster parents or birth parents or both or kid--youth or children in foster care or who have been in foster care really involved in the process. Advocates participate in group events. They share their personal experiences. These are the boots on the ground. So
they are going to legislators and telling their stories. They're writing letters, they're making phone calls, responding to action alerts that you might send out, and they're recruiting other people to help. So, you know, they might be saying to their friend, "Hey, I called my senator and told him to pass this bill. I need you to do that, too." Activists are passionate and action-oriented. They are persistent and not intimidated, and they keep the issue highly visible and immediate. So activists are--we've all been seeing lots of them on the news lately, right, with all the protests going on. Activists are the people who will chain themselves to something to get something done. They're people who will protest and make signs and show up at a big event. And that really does serve its purpose of keeping the issue really visible, really immediate, and...typically, activists don't really care about the politics. They're not worried about making a policymaker angry. They're not worried about who's gonna like or not like what they're doing. They're just really passionate about this issue and want to make sure that it gets done. And because of that, they tend to take action in spurts. So they find something they're really passionate about, and then they might not--they may or may not make the calls to the legislators and do all those other things, but they'll show up on the day that there's a big protest. So activists put the spotlight on the issue. They put pressure on policymakers to act. Sometimes—sometimes policymakers will do things because they don't want to have a big group of people show up and protest.

In West Virginia, 2 legislative sessions in a row we had teachers go on strike. So--and nobody wants that, right? We want our kids in school. We don't want 1,000 people at the capitol clogging up--you know, filling up the hallways and doing all those things. Policymakers typically don't want that. So sometimes it can help to say, "Hey, if we don't get these things, this is what could happen. We could have 1,000 people at the capitol." They frame the issue
as a crisis, and they will use extreme measures when needed. So they will chain themselves to something. So rallies and marches, demonstrations, and civil disobedience all fall into that category.

And then there are strategists. The strategists know the existing laws. They are kind of aware of the landscape. They understand the system. They have the ability, typically, to write legislation or amendments to bills or position papers, op-eds, those types of things. They have the ability to develop strategies and to negotiate, but they tend to build long-term relationships with policymakers. So where the activist doesn't really care who they make mad, the strategist is thinking about how to maintain relationships and still get what they want to get done. So they develop the issue and the message. They rely on the advocates and the activists for both input and action. So strategists can't act alone. They can't go out and just say, "Well, this is what needs to happen." So one of the reasons that I started our state association, our network of foster parents was because I knew that to make state-level changes, we had to have a critical mass. I couldn't just go to the capital and say, "I'm a foster parent, and this is what needs to change." I had to have a number of foster parents behind me. And because I did that, we have been really effective at doing that.

So some of the things that strategists do, they write policy alerts, they spend a lot of time at the capitol building those relationships. They attend political events. And they tend to negotiate and mediate with policymakers, staff, advocates, and state agencies. So your strategist usually is the person in the room where it happens. I'm a little "Hamilton" obsessed, so--ha ha! So to quote that. They are the people who are at the table often or try to be at the table, want to be at the table when they are talking about the language that's gonna go into a bill or talking about, "How are we gonna fund this thing and where can we move things around?" Or, "What's
the best way to structure this?"

Um...so every role has value, and you don't have to play every role. And sometimes people think of advocacy as well. You start out as an advocate, and then you become an activist, and then later, you become a strategist. Or that it's sort of this hierarchy, and it's really not. Without all 3 of those roles, advocacy is not as successful. You really need everybody, and everyone is as important. And often, you'll play a different role on different issues.

So when it comes to child welfare, I am typically a strategist right now. 2 years ago, I wasn't. Before I started this, I might have been an advocate sometimes. For a long time, I was a strategist. Sometimes a strategist and sometimes an advocate on disability issues Now if I engage in that, I'm more of an advocate. You know, if it comes to poverty or other things or education, we have great strategists who work on those issues so I don't try to take over the strategy, but I will make phone calls and send emails and tweets all day long about [audio distorted]. Um...so make sure that you respect your partners and that you do make those calls and send those tweets for them so that then when they need you to do--when you need them to do the same thing, they're willing. And then coordinate with everyone. And part of the role of an advocate--or, I'm sorry, a strategist is to make sure that everyone is informed so that everyone's on the same page.

So if you can, again, just type a letter in the Q&A. I'm wondering which role you feel like you identify with the most as an advocate. Do you think you're an activist, an advocate, or a strategist? And we'll say when it comes to child welfare and foster are...since that's our topic today.

I'm getting one "B." Anybody else? Someone else says "All 3." That's great. I can be all 3 sometimes, too. When our teachers were striking, I was working at a college, and so I did show up
and lend my support to that as well. Um... some have worked all 3 roles with different jobs. I see an "A" and "B." Um... OK. Awesome. So we have a good mix of people, which is good. Sometimes when I do this poll, I get lots of people who are in one group and not so much the other groups. So I'm glad to see that.

For the purposes of today, we'll talk a little bit more about advocates and strategists than activists, but that's certainly a valuable role, too.

If anybody has a question, feel free to type it in the chat, and I can check as I'm talking, or Elizabeth can stop me if someone types one in.

So what are the steps when you start doing advocacies? So, first, you have to identify your issue and develop the ask. So you have to think about what is--if the issue is, "We don't have enough peer support in our jurisdiction," or "Foster parents are not included in the planning team meetings for the kids in their home or they're not included in the policy issues," think about what the issue is or your topic, and then think about the ask and then figure out where you need to advocate. So if it's an issue of peer support, it might be that you have--if you need funding, you may need to go to your state, or you may need to talk to some local foundations or others who have funding...and do some advocacy around, "You know, this is a really important thing and here's why it needs to be funded." I'll take a second and say that sometimes I have people say to me, "Well, why does peer support require funding?" Because foster parents time is valuable. Ha ha! And if they're going to support each other, it's important that we recognize that as valuable and also because it takes staff time and funding to coordinate and to make sure things are a good match and to make sure everybody has the support that they need to support other people.
So, uh...Oh, that's a good question. "How much has COVID affected the 3 positions?" I don't know the answer to that question. I was actually thinking more about the landscape right now of all of the protests and events around racial justice and how that may have impacted. And some people who are--maybe not thought of themselves as activists may be going to more of those types of events and other people may be not going if they're not comfortable but COVID--I think it's probably changed how people--certainly, it's changed how we do some of our advocacy. It's a lot harder to do in-person advocacy, right. So we don't get to go to the capitol and grab legislators in the hallway if nobody's there. So it's a lot more online and texting and calling and emailing right now.

So, sorry. Back to the steps for advocacy. So you have to figure out where you want to advocate. And this is something that a lot of times people, when they're doing advocacy, go down the wrong avenue. So I'll have parents who start talking to the head of our child welfare agency about, um...decisions that they didn't like in the courtroom or the fact that a judge wouldn't let them into their courtroom. And the head of the child welfare agency has no control over the court 'cause they're different branches of government. So thinking really carefully about where you need to do your advocacy.

And so one of the things I'm pushing our state on right now is more support for foster and kinship families during COVID, but one of the challenges is we just don't have a whole lot of funding in our state. So then I'm also doing that advocacy at federal level because we need Congress to give that funding to states. So making sure that you're in the right avenue and going in the right direction with your advocacy and your ask. Then you're gonna want to collect data. It can be challenging to find enough data, especially if you're topic is foster parents. We have some data on kids, not so much on foster
parents. So there are some great resources out there, and there are some links at the end of this PowerPoint, but it can be challenging to find that.

So one of the things that we did in our state was do a survey. I worked with our state agency and our local university to develop and conduct a survey of foster parents so that we could start to collect some of that data. So there are some other states. I know Washington state does one every 2 years. So they have a good model. We're collecting that data over time. But really, looking at using data to inform your position and to back you up for what it is that you want. So being able to say to a lawmaker, "Peer support helps us keep foster parents fostering longer. It helps make sure that kids aren't moved as often and placements aren't failing and disrupting as often." Those are things that can help them then make it see why this is important and make a decision to support it.

Identify your partners and gather support. So you always want to take a look at who else is working in this space. What are they doing? And then gather other people to support, because as I said earlier, you can't do it by yourself.

Develop recommendations and strategy. So think about what it is that you want. You need to make sure you know exactly what you're asking for, and we'll talk about that a little more in a second and then figure out the best strategy. So is your best strategy contacting a bunch of legislators? Is it writing an op-ed in the local paper? Is it gathering foster parents to tell their stories? You know, there's different approaches to strategy. And then always make sure that you evaluate, and we'll talk about more about each of these steps.

So I should--there we go. So first develop the ask. First of all, you have to have one. You have to know exactly what it is that you're asking for. So going to a policymaker and saying, "We need more peer support" is not an ask. You need to be very specific about what it is that you're looking for. Always
you want to make sure that your ask is from a child's point of view. So even if it is, "Foster parents will foster longer if they're supported of if they feel heard in the team meetings or...they'll feel more satisfied and happier and they'll help recruit more parents," those are all from the parents' perspective. And those can be added, but you want to make sure that your main message is "Children are better served by parents who feel supported." "Children are able to have more stable placements when their caregivers are well-supported." So making sure that it's really from a child's point of view, because they're, of course, the most important people in this whole system, right.

Making sure that you use easily understood language. So a colleague and I did a training similar to this one in a state that neither of us had spent much time in. And the people in our audience were referring to something called "The Red Book." And both of us looked at each other and said, "We don't know what that is." So your legislators won't--or policymakers likely won't know what that is either unless they're the child welfare agency.

In our state, the planning meeting for kids is called an MDT. And when you go to the capitol and tell legislators that foster parents aren't invited to the MDT, they have no idea what that means. So not using jargon and initials or things that they won't know but making sure that you use really clear language.

Put the audience in the issue. So ask them to think about what they would want for their own child. If their own child were in this position or a child that they care about or love, what would they want and how would they be best served? And then make sure always that it's solution-focused. You don't ever want to just say, "Here's the problem" or, you know, “I'm unhappy about this situation." You need to make sure that you have an ask and a solution.
So determining where to advocate. You want to work with a strategist, if there is one. That's one of the goals and the roles of a strategist is to make sure that they're paying attention to who else might be doing this work and coordinating with them.

Think about who has the power to make that change that you're looking for. So like I said earlier, not talking to the child welfare agency about the judicial system or vice versa or not talking to your state agency about what it is that you need Congress to do or vice versa. Look at who's already working on it, and then what strategy is currently happening. And is that effective? And then think clearly and thoroughly about where you most need your advocates. Where is that army most needed? Is it that you need stories? Is it that you need everybody to call or tweet and say pass this particular bill or add this much money to a bill or, you know, what is it that you most need the help with?

Data collection--I mentioned that we developed a survey. You can--and sometimes even just polls and less formal surveys that you can do of key stakeholders are also really effective. Focus groups is another great way to get data. And then helping others, you know, compile the data that is there and using that information in letters and phone calls. 50% of birth parents experience this. 75% of foster parents want to have a stronger relationship with the birth parent in whatever it is that you think is gonna be effective.

Identify your partners. There's always strength in numbers. It's really hard to do any of this kind of advocacy on your own, so again, look at who's working on this. Who's not working on it but should be brought into the group to, um--so think through your usual and unusual suspects.

In my state, some of my key partners are state chapter of the
National Association of Social Workers. Their executive director and our director of the state chapter of the Prevent Child Abuse...Prevent Child Abuse America, our state chapter, the 3 of us and a couple of others tend to work a lot on legislative advocacy and other systems issues. Another is the head of one of our largest child placing agencies. But then I also work a lot with advocates who are working specifically on education, especially right now, as we're looking at COVID and school reopening and how did that impact kids in the foster care system and families--birth families, foster parents, everyone.

So, looking at not just your usual, you know, the other--the child placing agencies is probably a pretty common place to look for partners, but sometimes--we have a grassroots organization called Our Future West Virginia that works a lot with kids. They work with families experiencing poverty. They work sometimes with families who are foster families or who are part of the child welfare system. So they are another partner that you might not think of, but looking at where are there grassroots organizations or others that can be helpful.

And then also, what emerging leaders do you want to recognize elevate, or engage? Again, give to get. So support their issues so that they can support yours, you know, whenever possible. Help with outreach efforts and then make sure that you have a wide cross-section of supporters. And then you'll want to develop your recommendation. So when you're doing that, you're gonna want to do a lot of research. Really think about who is this going to affect. How much will it cost? And when you're looking at cost, you want to think about both the cost to implement and the cost if we don't implement. So if we don't implement high-quality, effective peer support, the cost is however much the dollar amount is, but the cost is that we are training more foster parents, because we have a higher turnover rate. We're having to move kids more often, which takes more case worker time
and certainly causes more trauma on the kids. So think about-and also, you want to look at cost from a dollar perspective but also from the cost of the people involved...perspective and to the system as a whole. There's a great logic model builder for helping you develop recommendations at the link there toolkit.childwelfare.gov that can really help you develop kind of a--sometimes graphic things are really helpful, especially with policymakers.

One of the things I really had to learn and tweak over the last couple sessions was I have a tendency to think, "OK, legislators don't know. They're not near as well-versed in child welfare as I am, so I have to give them all this information." And then they look at me and go, "I don't have time to read 3 pages or even 1 page. I need 3 bullets." You know, I thought I was doing great because I gave them a 1-page thing, and they're like, "No. I need 3 bullets or I need a graphic, because I have 100 other people or 500 other people giving full-page documents." So that's a really good way to create a more graphic representation.

Think through smart goals, and make sure that you're getting buy-in from advocates. And then always make sure that you're evaluating your progress as you're going. What's working? What's not working? When you have successes, be sure to celebrate them. Sometimes advocacy can feel really difficult and tiring and kind of like you're just trudging through mud all the time because it's sometimes really hard to get a success. So even if it's a tiny, little success, even if it's 5 people showed up at the capitol on the day that I wanted them to, that's a huge success. If that's the first time you've done it or that's—certainly during COVID, even getting 5 people on the phone could be a big success. So celebrate those successes and recognize the work that went into them. And then recalibrate and tweak and make sure that you're sustaining. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Any kind of policy
advocacy takes a long time and a lot of effort over time, so you don't want to burn yourself out. Don't give up. I'll pause for one second and see if anyone has questions. Um...check the time as well. There I am. Um...

Elizabeth Kramer: So we're at about 3:40 right now, and I don't see any questions in the Q&A box, but feel free to type some in or to put them in the chat box.

Marissa Sanders: So advocacy with specific audiences--and this is part of why I was asking that question at the beginning...when you are doing legislative advocacy, which you've heard me talk a fair amount about because it's one of my favorite things to do, obviously, from the perspective of the strategist, the role of the strategist is to develop the key relationships with the key players. So the committee chairs, the leadership of the house and the senate and also remember that their staff people are also key people, key players, so whoever the gatekeeper is for your senate president or your speaker of the house, making sure that you have a good relationship with those people is also really important, because they help you get access to the other people, to the leaders.

Um...identify allies and opponents. The strategy is really gonna--the strategist is really looking at "Who's gonna support me? "Who's gonna oppose this and why, and what is my response to the opposition?" Monitor progress and changes. Engage advocates at appropriate times and in strategic ways.

So one of the big things that I find myself doing as a strategist when I'm doing legislative advocacy is thinking, "OK, when do I most need people to call legislators and what's the message?" And sometimes I don't know what the message is until right before I need them to call, because it depends on what--I have to wait till I see the bill, or I have to wait until I see what the state agency's gonna do or what their position
is so that I know what our message should be--support it, don't support it, change it to this, so figuring that out and then how to engage them and then coordinating efforts with partners and advocates and activists. The advocate, when it comes to legislative advocacy, will understand the legislative process--so understand, in the end, sometimes the strategist or someone else needs to do some training with your advocates, 'cause you want them to understand why a committee meeting is important.

What does it mean to run a bill? Is a phrase that we often use in the legislative world to talk about a committee or the full body taking up a bill for discussion and vote. So if you're saying to your advocates, "They're gonna run this bill in the health committee tomorrow, and I need everyone to call a chair," you want them to understand what that means. The advocate can study the issue, find the audience, and then plan for that interaction and follow-up.

Um...when it comes to executive branch officials, it's really very similar, but there are some small differences. So whether this is your county child welfare agency or state or whatever your jurisdiction is, the strategist, again, builds relationships with those key people, studies the agency's policies. So you know, there's legislation and then there's agency policies and sometimes in our state, we have contracts with the child placing agencies and then their policies. So they're familiar with all of those different policies. And they also tend to learn what are the opportunities for involvement. Is there an advisory board? Are there committees? In our state, we have roughly--it was monthly until COVID, and now it's a little less than monthly, child welfare collaborative that's open to the public and it includes lots of state agency representatives as well as lots of non-profit organizations and universities and all kinds of different people who are interested in or involved with child welfare. So that's one opportunity.
And then involving advocates. So you're inviting advocates to those opportunities and helping them be aware of them. The advocate, when it comes to executive branch--we'll learn those policies, although maybe not to the same depth. Hone their personal story, which I'll talk about a little bit more in a minute. And then serve on those boards, committees, work groups, or attend those meetings whenever they can. Working with the media, which is its own type of strategy for advocacy and is a really important one oftentimes, the strategist, again, develops those relationships. So you're seeing the thread here. The strategist really--a big role or part of the role of being a strategist is to develop those relationships with the key people on all these different fronts. They write press advisories and press releases and op-eds and other things. And often, it's great to include other advocates and other people in writing op-eds so that you have--"A," you can target some different newspapers and platforms and also because then there's more than one voice being heard.

And then the strategist just really studies the issue so that they're seen as the expert. And because they have those relationships, the media will tend to come to them. And then the advocate is willing and ready to be interviewed. So you want a group of advocates who are familiar enough with the issue and have a personal story that they are and that they're comfortable enough talking with the press and being interviewed. They're gonna study the issue, know some statistics and trends, and then really hone their personal story and learn to write op-eds.

So when it comes to sharing your personal story, before I do that, I'm gonna just see...do we have any questions? I'm looking at them. I will post the toolkit link. I'll probably wait till the end, but I'll also be happy to share these slides if there's a way to get those out to registrants.
Elizabeth Kramer: There is. If you send them to me, Marissa, at the end, I will send them to everybody.

Marissa Sanders: Great, great, and it'll be in there. But yes, I will post that as well.

Um, let's see...sometimes the most difficult thing to do is to figure out where to start--that's very true--on the state, national, and local level, so how do you do that without stepping on toes or offending other potential stakeholders?

That's a really, really great question.

First of all, figuring out which level you need to be advocating on--is it local, state, or national? And sometimes it's multiple levels. So like I mentioned with trying to get more support for foster and kinship families in my state, I am advocating at a state level--but for COVID, in particular--I am advocating at a state level, but I'm also saying to Congress, "Look, we need more money at the state level so that they can give it to foster parents and other parents who are needing that kind of support."

So sometimes it is a multi-pronged position, but then, making sure that you're not stepping on toes. I think the best way to do that is to build those relationships wherever you can to say, you know, "Who is advocating for this?" And sometimes, again, those are people you wouldn't think of.

So I was on a call just this week with staff members for one of our senators, our US senators for our state. And the other people on that call included our Prevent Child Abuse chapter, our Planned Parenthood, which is not something that would normally be a person that I would think of, but we actually worked together a lot at the legislature, because she's a really great advocate and has relationships. Another person is
working on child--or, I'm sorry--child care advocacy. So the topic of that call was specific mostly to the need for more child care availability. And I was able to bring the child welfare perspective to that. But those are some partners that I wouldn't necessarily have thought of. So as you build those relationships, then your partners will also say to you, "Hey, did you know that so-and-so's working on this?" And we should pull them in or I'm gonna ask them to include you in their meeting. So that's where networking really comes in handy.

Um...how much professional training is involved with becoming an advocate? You don't really need necessarily any professional training. It's helpful, I think. The way that I learned most of my advocacy skills, I did go to a few really helpful trainings. But really, the way that I learned most of it and certainly the way that I learned the ropes for my state's legislature and how it works and the ins and outs and details of--'cause every state is a little different-- was by getting to know and build relationships with other advocates who kind of took me under their wing and took me around the capitol and helped me learn that process. So, you know, training is helpful, but if you can find the strategists who are working, even if they're working on a different issue.

Another example of a partner that was--I was a director of our State Commission for the Deaf for a while. And when I was doing legislative advocacy on that, I became good friends with a lobbyist for the teacher's union. And we didn't have a whole lot in common except that we were always in the same committee meetings because I would happen to be working on education issues. But there were many times when I would say to her, "I need to talk to this legislator about my issue, but I don't have a relationship with them. Can you connect me? Can you introduce me?" Or sometimes it was, "I can't remember what they look like. Can you grab them when they walk by?" 'Cause they give you
these little pictures that sometimes it's hard to--they don't always look the way they do in the picture. "Can you make the introduction?" "Can you help me figure out how to frame?" "What do you know about their background so that I can frame this issue?"

So who hires or chooses to become an advocate? Really, anybody can become an advocate. So if you have the time and the passion and you want to advocate on an issue, you can do it. The challenge comes in making sure that you're... you're gonna be the most effective, then you want to work with other people who are already doing advocacy on those issues, because it can be challenging. So if they're pushing for more--I'm trying to come up with an example.

Um...where you might be opposed. If they're pushing for stronger relationships between birth and foster parents--and I know that everyone on this call thinks that's important--but let's just say for sake of argument that you come in and say, "Well, no, I think that, you know, they shouldn't have relationships." That could pose a problem for the advocacy that everyone else is doing. So it's important to--and make it harder for you to do your advocacy. And there's always gonna be opposition, but if you're working toward the same goal, ultimately, of supporting families, making sure that kids have the best experience possible in child welfare and that our child welfare system functions as well as it can for everyone, then finding those partners and figuring out how you can work together, even if you don't always support the same things or agree on the same things, is really important. And there are organizations that hire people to be advocates. Sometimes state associations do that, although most don't have a lot of funding in my experience. But there are others, sometimes, who will hire or lobbyists I see that a lot less in child welfare than I did in disability, but also, you can sometimes just create that possibility.
So I went from the idea of a state association to fully paid staff—minus a salary for myself—and benefits in 4 months, because it was an idea that lots of people thought was needed and so I was able to connect with community partners and get them funding. So you can kind of decide to be the advocate if you're good at it and doing well and building those relationships. And if you're just interested in calling people or calling legislators or sending emails or getting involved in other issues, there's lots and lots and lots of mailing lists and websites where you can sign petitions, and you can get connected with leaders who are doing it and say, "Hey, I want to be-li want to get your information so that when there's a need to call" or--somebody asked me yesterday to join in a tweet storm on an issue. You know, I want to be the person who helps do that on this issue. So sometimes, it's just connecting with who's out there already.

So as we look at your personal story, the personal story is probably one of the biggest tools that you have, because policymakers are often more moved by the individual standing in front of them who is experiencing this system or this issue than they are by data and other things. And sometimes they're moved by data, but that personal story really drives it home for them. So a story paints a picture and it makes it really real to them, and it enables people to establish that connection, to think, "Well, how would I handle that if I were in that situation?" And it also makes it clear that it's not just numbers on a page. It's not--it's real-live people who are experiencing this. It's not someone just making things up and saying, "Well, 50% of people..." so for advocacy, it's great to combine stories with data. So if you have a personal story and then you can say, "And this applies to lots of other people" and give a percentage or even--often, I'm just saying because we have so little data, I'll say, because they know I have 900 foster parents in my group, so I'll say, "I have lots of people expressing..." or "I have heard from several people..." which just lets them know that it's not just
one person.

Um...I'm having trouble advancing my slides. There we go.

So establish your goals. Identify what those are. Decide what messages relate well to that goal. So when you're thinking about your personal story, what is your goal in telling it? And then think about the parts of your story, because you're not gonna be able to tell every detail from start to finish. Think about the parts of your story that relate well to that goal. So if your goal is "We need more peer support for foster parents," one of the parts of my story that I often tell with that is that I decided to become a foster parent because I met someone who had been one. And when I was taking our pre-service training, she and I had lunch every week so that I could ask her questions that I wasn't comfortable asking in class or that I would say to her sometimes, "So this is what they said, but now tell me your experience in the real world." And that helped me get through the process. So sometimes, I'll choose that if that's my goal. If my goal is foster parents need to be at the planning team meetings, then I might talk about my experience being at those meetings or not being at those meetings and how it impacted the children in my home.

Develop your rough talking points, so again--as I just said, you're highlighting the support services for older children or you're talking more about the challenges, your talking points might be if you're talking about services for older children. Children who face a variety of challenges are being raised in families. Families are the best place for all children and youth. There's a family for every child and families need training and support to help ensure that they can meet the needs of children and youth.

So you're gonna, again, frame it from the perspective of the child, talk about why it's so important. Talk about where it's successful, don't just talk about things being a problem,
but things that have worked and then talk about how that relates to families. And then you want to identify your storytellers, so think carefully, if you're the strategist, especially, but even if you're an advocate, think about who might be the best messengers. So sometimes, it's types of families.

If you are talking about kinship, for example. If our topic is something related to kinship care, I'm not the best messenger on that because I am not a kinship care provider. I was a foster parent. If you're talking about something like post-adoption support, you probably don't want a family that's never adopted to be the messenger. You want a family who has experienced the need for that support. Also think through--sometimes the best messenger is whoever's in that legislator's jurisdiction or who has a connection to an executive branch person. Especially with legislators, you want to think about their jurisdiction, their district, and who is in that, because they'll tend to give them more time and attention. Then solicit your stories. Find the constituents of the policymakers, as I just said, so the people who are in their district--ask other people. If you don't know someone in their district, ask around, find someone. Seek a diversity of story and storytellers. So find someone with older kids and someone with younger kids. Someone who's a brand-new foster parent or just starting the process of becoming certified or licensed and find someone who's got a lot of experience. And then, choose one or a few people whose stories best convey your messages and show that diversity and help them to narrow that down, 'cause they're not all gonna get 15 minutes, usually.

So a few tips. Make sure that it connects to your goals. Keep it simple. Be positive and strengths-based. So try to keep it positive wherever you can. You know, you might mention an issue, but then talk about what worked or what you did to get through it.
Use person-first language. So we tend to say children in foster care or children who are--we put the children first. We talk about families who are in the child welfare system, and we do the same thing--Excuse me--when we talk about kids with disabilities. So we talk about kids who experience--who have experienced trauma or kids who have disabilities or have needs, as opposed to traumatized kids or something like that. You know, you want to put the child first. And then leave anybody that you're talking to with a possible solution. Here's what we're asking you to do. Here's the solution to that.

One quick storytelling example that I'll give is this last legislative session, we were working on a bill that was massive. It had just a ton of different things in it related to child welfare. It had bills of rights. It had a rate increase. It had contract language. It had just all kinds of different things in it. And the rate increase in particular was really difficult because we didn't have any money. The legislature—the house put in money, the senate took it out. They were saying they didn't have any money. By the last day of session, they had found the money, but I wasn't confident that they were necessarily gonna put it in there. So I had--one of my members contacted me and said that they knew this grandparent, and this grandparent came down from 3 hours away with another person, an advocate who supported her. She came down that night and spent the night and came to the capitol early the next morning, because she had completed all of her licensure process but they hadn't finished processing it. And she was getting a fraction of the reimbursement that she should have been getting for her 5 grandchildren. So she came, and we had--I don't know--maybe 30 minutes to connect with as many legislators outside the chambers as we possibly could before they went in to vote. And we were able to talk to probably 15 different people, and the reason she was there was for me to be able to say to them, "When you vote on this bill, this is who you're impacting. This is a real live person who not only is impacted but has taken the time
to drive here and to show up so that you can interact with her and she can be here to watch this." And that really put a little bit of some pressure on legislators, like, "Oh, there's a real person that is gonna be impacted if I vote against this thing."

So that's just an example. And literally, we didn't have time to tell them hardly anything about her story except for those few highlights that I hit. But we were also able to get her licensure completed. So that was helpful, 'cause her legislators got involved. But that's an example of getting someone to come and tell a story. And another day, we had...I did a training on the first day of legislative session for about 25 families, and then we had about 20 of them show up the next day, and we did a rally. And they went and talked to individual legislators and shared their stories. And that was--I heard over and over again throughout session from legislators who said, "Foster parents took the time to come here and tell me their story, and so I have to vote based on what they told me they needed."

And sometimes they only talk to one or two. Sometimes they came—we did have a town hall meeting where they came and met with lots of them, but sometimes it doesn't take a lot of people telling the story. Sometimes that one face or that one person can be enough to help them make that decision.

Um, so...some data resources and other resources. The Children's Bureau has some great...great data and reports that you can access, and these will be in the slides that'll be shared with you. Their child trends has great data on adoption, foster care, and kinship, and it's by state. You can look for your member of Congress. If you're doing congressional advocacy. And then state legislators can also be found with just an address at that common cause link.

And then some tools--oh. I don't have the link on there. I'm
sorry. One of the tools that I did in our state--and I'm happy to just send you the document. I can send it to Elizabeth to send out. We developed a challenges and solutions document. So it was a list of--I worked with members of my network and said, "What are our biggest challenges as foster parents or kinship parents or adoptive parents in our system?" We made a list, and we kind of categorized them, and then we came up with solutions for every single one of them. So when legislators said to me--well, you know, we were working at that point on a bill that was--we were opposing a big move that the state wanted to do. And they said, and I had started with this. "Well, here's the list of challenges, and here's the solutions that are posed by this thing." Because it was being sort of sold as this is gonna solve all of our problems. And so then they would say to me, "Well, then, what do you think we should do? If that's not the solution, what should we do?" And it was wonderful, 'cause then I'd say, "Well, I'm glad you asked. Here's our list of solutions." And that document got a lot of traction. It was shared at one of those child welfare collaborative meetings. I shared it with the governor's office. And now we have accomplished... somewhere between 1/3 and 1/2 of the solutions on that document. And it became sort of a guiding path for where we should direct our advocacy and how we wanted to prioritize issues. So I will include that when I send it out.

And then making infographics. As I said earlier, making things graphic and really easy for legislators or policymakers to get the information that they need and process it quickly. Canva is what I use. It's free unless you're using their proprietary pictures, and they you pay a couple bucks for it. Infogram, and Spark Adobe all are ways that you can make infographics pretty easily.

And then there is a ton of extra information about how to advocate and some more details about all of these topics
on the North American Council on Adoptable Children, or NACAC, website. So nacac.org is their link.

So I think we have lots of time—I hope I didn't go too fast—for questions. So, um...

Elizabeth Kramer: We definitely have time for questions.

Marissa Sanders: I'm glad people are so—anyone have questions? Feel free to type them. Um...and while we're waiting, have I worked on the issue of treatment in foster care in West Virginia? We are just sort of starting to embark on that. We have a few agencies that are doing it, but I guess when you say “worked on,” the question would be in what fashion. I'm certainly aware, you know, paying attention to it and looking at how we need to advocate to make sure it's as effective as possible or that we're using it appropriately. I'm happy to talk more offline on that, and I will put up a slide with my contact information as well. So you can use that email address, or I will also type in here—oh, I can't—my other email address, which is...do I have a way to...

Elizabeth Kramer: If you can type it into the chat box, that would send it out to all the panelists.

Marissa Sanders: It's on the slideshow.

Elizabeth Kramer: Oh, great. OK.

Marissa Sanders: I hope.

Elizabeth Kramer: Actually, yes, it is. It was covered up by my Q&A box.

Marissa Sanders: So that's—feel free to reach out to me specific questions as well.

Elizabeth Kramer: So we have another question in the chat box, Marissa, which
is, "Do you know who to reach out to if we have specific concerns regarding courts and lawyers refusing to follow policy guidelines?"

Marissa Sanders: So one strategy for that, and it's actually--I'm glad you mentioned that because I do do some advocacy in the judicial system. One of the big issues that came up in our challenges and solutions document and in our advocacy at the capitol, even, was guardians ad litem in our state are often a challenge for foster parents. We have a lot of foster parents who say, "I've never heard from them. Don't know who they are. Can't get ahold of them." So the legislature tried to put in some information in a bill, and the court system didn't like that because it was a different branch of government. But our supreme court set up a call line for people to call in their office if they're having a problem with their guardian ad litem. And so that they can track that and they can kind of see where the issues are. So our advocacy kind of resulted in that because they heard, when they heard from our survey, too, that we shared with the legislature and with them that this was an issue for a lot of people. So that's one option, and where that office is is in the- -I think every state has a court improvement program, which is there to help improve child welfare and juvenile justice hearings and start the process. So I work pretty closely with the head of our child--our court improvement program, and I'm on the board for that, so that's a really great option if you know who those people are to connect with them 'cause usually they're pretty familiar with the system and what the challenges are.

Elizabeth Kramer: Fantastic. Another really good question. "Do you have ideas on how to advocate for or access mental health resources for children?"

Marissa Sanders: Mmm, yes, actually.
Elizabeth Kramer: That could be a whole separate presentation probably.

Marissa Sanders: It could be, yes. Yeah. And one of the things I'm actually hoping we do to see more of is connecting the foster care system with the broad disability community that is out there advocating and pushing for services and for positive identity around disability, which includes mental health.

In fact, Sunday is the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. So it's a huge push from the disability community. So, um...if I can-- actually, if I can find it, I will post in the chat and share a link to a great video. There's also a great video when it comes to-- then I'll get to the answer in just a second, I promise-- when it comes to the different' roles that we talked about. A great way to see all those roles in action, there is a movie on Netflix called "Crip Camp," which is about, um...um...it's about people who are-- [distorted woman's voice]

Oh, sorry. I can't get the link. It's about a camp for kids with disabilities, but it really shows--it also shows a lot of the advocacy that the disability community has done, so it's a really great way to see all those different roles in action, but in terms of how to advocate for mental health resources and where to access them, the name of the video--I just saw that--is "Crip Camp." I'll just type it in here. Now I have the...now that I'm not sharing my screen, I can chat more easily.

Elizabeth Kramer: And you said it was on Netflix, right, Marissa?

Marissa Sanders: Yes. Um...here we go. For mental health resources, working with your state agency that handles that is one option. So we have a Bureau for Behavioral Health. Most state health departments will have a unit or a department that's working on or...bureau that's working on behavioral and mental health, mental health in particular.
A lot of states have mental health policy councils, which work specifically on that, on those issues. There are also, um... consumer groups that sometimes will gather, especially around--in our state, there's a lot around recovery, which intersects a lot with mental health, but other states have-- there's also organizations like NAMI, the National Alliance of the Mentally Ill or, um...I'm trying to think what other mental health organizations there are. Anyone in the disability community can kind of connect you with that as well. So you'll have a local center for independent living that works on all kinds of disability issues, including mental health. Um...and some of the--there's also-- every state has a protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities--something I'd love to see for kids in foster care--and they tend to do a lot around mental health as well or at least know of resources, so...um...

Elizabeth Kramer: OK.

Marissa Sanders: Any questions?

Elizabeth Kramer: There is.

Marissa Sanders: Yes. Sam says a great one--thank you--which is the substance abuse and mental health services... services administration.

Elizabeth Kramer: So I'm sort of going back and forth between the Q&A and the chat box, so please keep the good questions coming. Over in Q&A, we have, "do you find that foster parents are able to or encouraged to network within or outside of their respective DSS/CPS foster care agencies? So often, it seems that foster parents are all alone on a given issue or concern. They have company, but they just don't know it."

Marissa Sanders: So that is exactly why I started the network, in West Virginia, our network, because I was--I led a local support group for
families, mostly families who were certified through our state agency which they don't do any more but they used to. And so I knew that we had—we all had challenges, we all had great ideas and solutions. But with 10 families, I could not do state-level advocacy. 10 families just weren't enough voices. I also became quickly aware that lots of our child—our child-placing agencies, and many of them have support groups for their families. But with these small little pockets all over the state, we weren't coming together as a critical mass. And some agencies encourage foster parents to connect outside of their agency, and some not so much. In fact, some in our state have been discouraged from doing that. So that was really why I started the network because I knew that we needed that critical mass and I knew that it was gonna take organizing foster parents and kinship and adoptive across all of those lines—across county lines, across agencies, across—one of the things that I see happen a lot at both the national and state levels is kinship issues and foster issues. And in some ways, we create—sometimes, we even create two almost separate systems. And so one of the things, the decisions that I made very consciously was to bring all of these groups together. And sometimes we have adoptive issues as separate, too. And I said, "Look, yes, we all have some unique issues, but really our issues are a lot more alike than they are similar—than they are different. And we have so much more power when we all come together." If we divide into these small little groups, then we just don't have the power.

When I can go to the legislature and say, "I have 900 foster parents who are asking for this," or, you know, I have foster—and when I say "foster," I mean foster, adoptive, and kinship. They listen when they hear that. So I have really made a conscious effort to bring everybody together, and that's where—and really, most of that I've done through Facebook and just one-on-one conversations and I'm building groups and things like that.
But the peer support and the ability to just have people to ask those questions and speak more freely with and then, the ability to come together and advocate where the main driver's there. Um...anything else, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Kramer: Yes! A couple, actually. So "What suggestions do you have for advocacy for children during a foster care review board?"

Marissa Sanders: OK, when you're saying a "foster care review board," we don't really have those in West Virginia, so can you give me a little bit of background? Or at least we don't call them that. Ha ha! We may have them, but...

Elizabeth Kramer: Sure. So I would ask the original--the person who originally asked the question, maybe you could clarify a little bit which type of meeting? We've also got some additional resources that have posted in the chat box.

Marissa Sanders: Great.

Elizabeth Kramer: On children with disabilities and special needs, behavioral health and wellness, mental health resources.

Marissa Sanders: Awesome. Um...so I see the comment that it might be a local thing, the foster care review board. If you're talking about—I know some states or jurisdictions have like a citizen review board that use different cases. We had one, but it hasn't been real active lately so I don't know a whole lot about that. If you're talking about sort of the planning team--like in our state, it's a multidisciplinary team meeting. For advocating for kids in that, it can be challenging as a foster parent or the kinship provider because of some of the--some people in that team may perceive a bias on your part. So I always just advise people to stick with observable facts and things that they--things about the kids and make sure that they're talking specifically about what the kids might need and why and what they've seen that leads them to that conclusion.
I don't know if that's helpful or not, but...oh, boy.

Elizabeth Kramer: Other questions? If you could go ahead and put them in the chat box or the Q&A box. OK. "Do you have any suggestions, Marissa, on strengthening the relationship between foster parents and biological parents?"

Marissa Sanders: Yeah. So this is something that I know that the whole national system is wanting to do. Our state system wants to do it. I think that it's gonna take a lot more concerted effort in our state than some people are...giving it credit for, I guess. I think that in our state, in particular, and probably this is true in a lot of states, it really requires starting at the beginning. So it requires making sure that we're involving birth parents in how we recruit foster parents and how we train foster parents or kinship, umm... so that we are involving their perspective and making sure that we set that as an expectation that you're gonna have a relationship and you're gonna work together on this to support the child. Historically, that's not so much been done in our state, and so it really represents a pretty seismic cultural shift and paradigm shift in our state and I think a lot of states, as we're moving more towards that. I think it's gonna take a really concerted effort to make sure that everyone is at the table when decisions are made, both, again, at the policy level and the individual level.

Right now in our state, because we've organized foster parents, we have more of a voice in the policy, but I would love for someone to organize birth parents in our state. Unfortunately, I can't do it. But it would be great to have that voice included because right now they're not. So making sure that when we're making policies, we're not making it harder to build that partnership.

And then, always--and I meant to mention this earlier--it's
really important whenever you're pushing for policy change to remember that just changing policy is never enough. You also have to change culture and practice. So we can change the policies all day long, but if they're not followed and implemented appropriately, if the frontline workers aren't made aware and educated on how to implement it, then we haven't made it as successful as we want it to be. So monitoring that piece of it as well and making sure that we're looking at this issue on all fronts. So we have still have some workers who don't want to give contact information for the birth parent or the foster parents to the respective parties.

So doing that level of education but then also training foster parents to say, "I want to partner with the birth parent and I want this to be how we support these kids so that they can get all the caring adults and the support that they need" but also making sure everyone feels like they really have a voice in that process so that nobody's saying, "Well, they get services and I don't; they get support and I don't." And that sets up more of a contentious relationship, I think.

Elizabeth Kramer: Marissa, I don't know if this is a comment specific to this particular question--it certainly fits--or if it's sort of more overarching to the discussion overall, but it's not a question but just to put it out there for your reaction. "Kinship caregivers have a whole host of different dynamics. So, while yes, to get change legislatively saying they are one and the same may work, I fear that it's remiss not to address the differences on all levels."

Marissa Sanders: Well, I agree 100%, and I realize that I kind of glossed over that. And, in fact, I was thinking that before you commented. I was, "I probably should have been more clear about that." Because I tend to try to make sure I'm saying all 3 groups Whenever I'm talking, and sometimes that's right and sometimes it's not.
Elizabeth Kramer: Sure.

Marissa Sanders: No, I think that that is--there definitely are differences. And even when I talk with policymakers, I make that clear. You know, sometimes there's differences in the ways that we support; there's differences in the challenges that are faced, and then the dynamics that are experienced in those different settings. You're right. When I talk about bringing everybody together, I'm mostly talking about legislative advocacy and to some degree peer support because some of the issues still are--you know, if you're a certified kinship provider in our state, you're still experiencing a lot of the same challenges with the system. The challenges and the dynamics of your family and the birth family are very different, though.

So, yeah, I think that there is--we have a program called Healthy Grandfamilies that particularly works with grandparents on some of those issues and some other challenges and does some peer support with them, which I think is great. But it doesn't include all kinships, so that was one reason I included them, too. But, yeah. I think there--we definitely want to acknowledge the differences and talk about those challenges, but not let those differences divide us, I guess. Try to be understanding of everybody's different perspectives and not pit the different groups against each other, which I also see happen sometimes, where grandparents or kinship providers are almost pitted against foster parents in different ways by the system. And we don't want to see that happen either, so...

Elizabeth Kramer: Going back a little bit to the discussion of guardians ad litem. Not a question, but some insight regarding the GALs. "I've been fostering for 37 years, and in the years past, we were invited to a Q&A with incoming gal candidates. We still speak to people interested in becoming foster parents and individuals graduating from foster parent training. The stories and feedback to their questions and concerns
have been very beneficial, we've been told. In the case of guardian ad litem training, it has stopped, and that is a loss. We as quote/unquote older foster parents can be a source of support and insight to the newbies."

Marissa Sanders: Yeah. That's really insightful and really important. And where you can connect with the GALs and work with them. That's really important to help them understand, and I mean I think that one of the things I've learned in doing this advocacy is that everybody in the system really needs peer support. I mean, peer support is a fancy term that we use now, but really we all do, right.

So if you're building a new house, you're gonna talk to your friends who have done that before and ask them what were the problems and the challenges and what were they glad they did, what do they wish they'd done differently. It's no different, really. I mean, it's certainly more structured sometimes and maybe more important almost, especially when you're working with kids, but I think everybody needs that peer support. So to the extent we can connect new guardians ad litem with more experienced ones or with experienced foster parents, I think that's great, you know, when we can connect kinship families with other kinship families, social workers, case workers, the same kinds of things for them to have that peer support, too.

Elizabeth Kramer: Mm-hmm. "Marissa, I'm curious. What do you see as being some of the major barriers to people accessing peer support? I'm mean, I'm thinking, certainly, you know, if I need a plumber for my house--everyone needs a plumber for their house. If I were gonna become a foster parent, I don't really know anybody else. I mean, I do because of the work that I do, but you may not know anyone else who's ever foster parent--been a foster parent. So what do you see, really, as kind of the barriers to people accessing peer support?"
Marissa Sanders: Yeah. I think that if you're becoming a foster parent, it's especially difficult, right, because you probably--you may not have anyone in your immediate circle who has done that. Often, I think you'll find that if you start talking to friends, somebody knows somebody, right. But it is definitely a barrier that can be challenging. I think that social media has helped to bring some of that down. I get a lot of people--I always ask everyone when they join my Facebook group how they heard about the group. And a lot of them say, "It came up in my suggested groups on Facebook" or "I searched Facebook looking for something about foster care in West Virginia."

And I get people from other states and even other countries trying to join the group, and I'm like, "I'm sorry. I don't think I'll be very helpful, but here's a group in your area." But there's lots of people out there looking for that, so I think that has helped, but it's certainly--I mean, there's--not everybody's on social media, obviously. And I think it can be really challenging, and that's where it kind of comes down to word of mouth. But if you're already in the system, I think a barrier is—sometimes we get into those--into our agency or into this group or we feel because we're--you know, you can't talk about the case, and you can't talk about the details, which is all true and very important but remembering that you can talk about, you know, "I'm struggling with this part of the system. I'm struggling with having to have someone in my home every month or having to take time off of work to go to hearings" or whatever those things are and having that peer support to be able to talk about that. I think it is challenging when you feel like you're sort of in this. You're talking to workers all the time, but I hear from a lot of foster parents who say they feel very isolated, and that was one of the reasons I really pushed peer support to make sure that nobody, nobody should have to go through this alone.

That said, I have struggled to really engage people who are exploring foster care or interested in learning more. Thus far, I
have not let them in my Facebook group, because I want to make sure that it's people who are currently serving and who are committed to this. There's a part of me that's going, "I don't want to scare anybody away." And so I set up a different Facebook group for those people, but then they didn't really engage, and I even put some metrics in there and some people with real experience so they could answer questions, and I have not been able to get them to engage. So I think I'm gonna next try one-on-one connecting with them with experienced foster parents. 'Cause I know having someone when I was going through training was really, really important for me.

Elizabeth Kramer: Mm-hmm. Just a comment. Again, I don't see a question but a comment certainly for reaction or for thoughts. "I can tell you my barrier to peer support is that I don't know how that can help me. I also don't think it's fair to put more burdens on foster parents especially with Facebook groups that already meet a lot of your peer support needs. I feel like foster parents need help getting mental health care for children, we need direct services, organizations to support us versus someone to talk about our problems."

Marissa Sanders: Right. Yeah, I mean, I think one of the ways that peer support can address some of that is in what we're working to do in our network is to have some people who are trained and even paid a small stipend, not what they should be paid, certainly, but something to recognize their time. I know how valuable that is. And some people are in a better position to offer support than others. And some people have 6 kids and they're working full-time and they're, you know, feeling really overwhelmed. And those are not the people that you want to be trying to support. Those are people we want to support not ask to support others necessarily. But a lot of the peer support that I provide in my network is less about emotional support and mental health and more about, "I can't get ahold of my worker. Who do I call next?"
Or "I have this problem that I don't know how to address. Does this sound normal to you? Is this not normal to you?" You know, "Who do I call or what do I do with that?" So one of the things we'll be doing is training peer support for other foster parents to provide that kind of peer support. And we're also looking at grief support, because as helpful as I think professionals are, I think when you're grieving having a child leave your home, it's very--I mean, I've had people who are grief counselors say to me, "I don't know how to grieve this. I don't know how to process this." And the best thing for them was to talk to other people who have been through that experience. So sometimes it's that personal one-on-one discussion, and sometimes it is--I mean, Facebook does solve a lot of the problems because you can say, you know--one of the questions I always get..."How long is it from termination of parental rights to adoption? How long should I expect that to be?" Or, you know, those kinds of questions that come up all the time, and that stuff is pretty easily addressed in Facebook, but other things require more one-on-one.

Elizabeth Kramer: Mm-hmm. Sure, sure. I can see where the social media really fills the gap, too, because you can participate at your convenience, you know. So if you're--you know, you can't sleep and you're up at 4:00 in the morning, you can look at it if that's not your free time or then you can be on at some other point. But I can also see where it kind of has its limitations and its role, too. Just one last invitation to the group. If you've got any sort of closing questions, if you can put them in the chat box or in the Q&A box, and while we're waiting to see, Marissa, I just want to thank you again for taking time out of your schedule. I know you have a very busy professional life. I know you're a very busy mom to your 4-year-old who has not yet made a cameo, unfortunately, but I trust that he has many thoughts on the issue. But thank you so much for sharing this really important information with us. I certainly
appreciate it and thanks also to our audience. I know end of the day on Friday is not always the best time to offer these things, but I really appreciate you all being here today and being engaged and asking questions. We did have one last question, which is, "Do you have a LinkedIn account?"

Marissa Sanders: I do, personally. I don't have one for the network but I haven't been on it in a long time, so it hasn't been updated, but I do have one. So feel free to find me on there. Facebook is probably an easier way to find me, or email. So really quick, I'll throw my email address in here so that people have that.

Elizabeth Kramer: OK. And just a follow-up, Marissa will be sending me the slides, so I will go ahead and get those out to everybody in the group probably either end of the day today or early next week, so watch your inbox for that. Also, look through the webinar chat. There have been quite a few additional resources posted that provide really, I think, some great information and organizations for you all to connect with.

I don't see any other questions, so I'm gonna go ahead and close things up. So thank you, again, Marissa. Thank you to our audience, and I hope you all have a wonderful weekend. Thanks so much.

Marissa Sanders: Thanks, everyone.

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