
[00:00:00]: Music Introduction

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You’ll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

**TOM OATES** [00:00:34]: On this episode of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast we want to share some stories that we hope resonate with all of you who are either planning or working toward embarking on a social work career or will have new caseworkers joining your staff. I’m Tom Oates and today’s episode, “Casework: What It Really Takes” shares the reflections, stories and impacts from three former caseworkers who currently make up part of the large and talented team here at Information Gateway.

[00:01:03]: Now, each of these experienced professionals have different pathways through social work, so they all have separate perspectives - but we feel it’s really helpful, because the field can clearly take you into so many areas serving families. Now, there are some key lessons here to take away, especially how to prepare yourself mentally for working with families who may be different from what you’re used to, approaching the work professionally and making the most out of the partnerships you’ll need to support families.

[00:01:33]: Okay, we sat down with Marla Belian, a program manager focusing on Gateway’s out of home care resources - now this includes managing the overarching Gateway efforts in support of National Foster Care Month and our collaboration with the array of National Foster Care Month partners. Marla also serves as a key presenter at many of the conferences that Gateway attends, so there’s a good chance you may have met her if you’ve approached our table at some of the field’s larger Child Welfare related conferences.

[00:02:01]: Kelly Canter is Information Gateway’s discretionary grants manager, she is responsible for coordinating and orchestrating the information and resources developed based on all of the lessons learned and findings that come from the Children’s Bureau’s discretionary grants - and they are provided to help develop and research innovative practices to improve outcomes.

[00:02:23]: And Kari Kryda is a key member of Gateway’s web content management team. Kari is one of the primary contributors to reviewing, validating, and posting all of the resources and content that’s available to you on [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov). Now, Kari and Marla work very closely together to direct the development and the resources that end up on the National Foster Care Month website.

[00:02:45]: Okay, valuable perspective and guidance for prospective caseworkers coming up and it’s great information for those pursuing a master’s in social work and those managing new caseworkers. And it’s right here, on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.
[00:03:03]: So, Kelly, Marla and Kari, I want to thank you guys for being a part of this. I’d like to give everybody a sense of your background a little bit when it comes to casework practices, so could you give me a little bit of your experience and, and Marla, if we could start with you?

**MARLA BELIAN [00:03:17]:** Sure, so, I am a licensed clinical social worker, licensed in the states of D.C., Maryland and Virginia with a background in Child Welfare work. I’ve done some work in direct practice as a caseworker and some work as a supervisor, as well.

**TOM OATES [00:03:35]:** Kari?

**KARI KRYDA [00:03:36]:** I worked at Department of Children and Families in Palm Beach County, Florida for two years conducting and coordinating special victims investigations with allegations of egregious abuse and neglect that would result in severe injury and/or death.

**TOM OATES [00:03:55]:** And Kelly?

**KELLY CANTER [00:03:56]:** Hi, everyone. So, I started out as a dependency case manager in Tallahassee, Florida. I did that for a couple of years and then transitioned into Child Protective Investigations, I did that for another couple of years before getting my master’s in social work back in Wisconsin, and then I also worked for the state of Wisconsin in developing programs and monitoring programs for youth aging out of foster care before coming to Child Welfare Information Gateway.

**TOM OATES [00:04:30]:** So, each of you has had the, the, you know, what we call boots on the ground experience and for those folks that may be coming out of school or still in school and are thinking that this is the path that they wanna go, sometimes, there’s a reality check, and so, what I want from, to, what I want to provide folks is that, kind of, real world experience about what this does to, to your expectations, versus how you adapt, versus how you grow. And so, there’s always that time of the first time knocking on a door. Marla, the first time you knocked on a door, what did you expect versus what really happened?

**MARLA BELIAN [00:05:09]:** Well, I will say that whatever you learned in the classroom absolutely applies in your home, in an actual home, but it can be a very different experience. I think a lot of social workers will go into this type of work just wanting to, you know, save the world, or make a change - I think for me I really wanted to work one on one with clients to really help empower one change at a time.

[00:05:37]: And so, going into that first day, you go in and talk with clients and you think, you know, I’m gonna meet somebody and let’s get started and get to work. But, the reality oftentimes is that it’s gonna take time. Folks that you’re working with, clients that you’re working with may not necessarily want to get started on that change day one the same way that you as a social worker might be ready to jump in and get started on.

[00:06:02]: And so, really just realizing that sometimes it takes time - take a step back and build a relationship - really is something that was a reality for me separate than what I might’ve excepted getting started in this field.

**TOM OATES [00:06:16]:** And then along the lines of that, you’ve got this idea of, okay, this is gonna take work - and then you’re handed a second case, and a third case and a fourth case and the investment
that you’d like to give versus the investment that you can give, Marla, that’s gotta be a real tough burden for folks - a lot of them that are young - to take on. When they get to managing a big load - and so many, you know, professionals are dealing with large caseloads - what can you tell them to how to, how to manage all of that?

MARLA BELIAN [00:06:49]: Well, I’ll say that managing it is a learned skill. You’re not really going to know how to do that on your first day, and that’s okay. I think that you’re gonna have any number of cases and every case is going to have so many people attached to it - whether it be the lawyers or the education team or the mentor and the CASA worker - it’s a, it really is a learned skill to figure out how to balance the communication with the clients and all of the team members.

[00:07:23]: And you know, it’s just gonna take time. Similar to trying to figure out your way in how to help the clients help make change, figure out how to manage your time is a learned skill and it will take some time to figure out and that’s okay.

TOM OATES [00:07:37]: You know, you brought up about working across the systems and working with a number of different teams - I wanna put a pin in that because I wanna come back and talk a lot about how you can best, you know, work across the systems and create those relationships. But each of you guys when we were talking before we recorded, we were sharing some specific stories - some of those, kind of, learned skills that Marla touched base on - and so, you know, each of the three of you had something unique, and so, Kelly, if I can start with you, you had brought up about the idea of, kind of, respecting and also recognizing that there’s gonna be different family dynamics than maybe you are used to as an individual, and you’ve gotta be able to respect that and understand that every family, we always hear every family is different. But how do then you work with a dynamic that may be something that you’re unfamiliar with?

KELLY CANTER [00:08:30]: Yeah, I mean, I think it’s really important to recognize that, and understand that there are lots of different kinds of families out there. Marla had mentioned, you know, wanting to, sometimes the motivation to go into Child Welfare work is one where it’s the simple desire to, to change the world and to save children and I think - I didn’t get my undergraduate degree in social work, it was communications - so I kind of fell into Child Welfare with that more idealized view of it.

[00:09:04]: And family dynamics are unique and complex and I think in order to be able to do your job really effectively - coming into a new family takes a lot of respect and time and understanding the difference between differences and a real safety concern - it’s important to recognize your own biases and that families may look a lot different than your own family or have different dynamics than what you’re used to in your, in how you grew up or how your friends grew up and I think it’s really important to take time - if you’re going to be effective - take time to build those relationships through mutual respect and patience and understanding your own biases prior to going in.

TOM OATES [00:09:59]: Was there anything that you would do, let’s say before knocking on the door or when you get handed that case to, to kind of, you know, mentally separate yourself to look at this clinically versus, kind of, with your own background to say, okay, this is going to be - is there any exercise or, kind of, mindset you were able to, kind of, get yourself in before walking in and, and introducing yourself to a family and getting introduced to them?
KELLY CANTER [00:10:27]: I think that looking back now, I probably would say, yes, I think it’s very important to be in the moment and to mentally and emotionally prepare yourself for meeting a new family and there’s a lot of unknowns going into a new home and it can be scary depending on where it is or what the circumstances are or what the report was.

[00:10:52]: I think I was one of the young caseworkers who felt a lot like she was going from case to case and didn’t have a lot of time to think or breathe in between - now with some maturity and looking back, I think that it is, it’s really important to maybe have some of those practices or exercises in the back of your mind to, to prepare yourself before going in. I, I think it’s really important to recognize potentially your own, your own biases, I think that they can sneak up and, and really respecting the parent/child bond and the importance of that and, really early on.

TOM OATES [00:11:35]: And there’s the factor of also you’re respecting what the family has already done, there’s already bonds already created within that, you know, Kari, we hear now about, you know, getting to know the family and taking time and trying to understand, but yet, there’s also a point of you can’t, you can’t get too involved, at least emotionally - and where you were in Florida and what you were doing, there has to be a need to also, kind of, create those boundaries so you can go on with the rest of your day.

KARI KRYDA [00:12:05]: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, for me, I was really steadfast on personal and professional boundaries, especially in that type of position, you have to be flexible and prioritize, because you’re making decisions all day long with multiple families, multiple kids. So, you’re dealing with different scenarios all day long and I think - touching on what Kelly said about how you are brought up, or your upbringing as a whole, can really impact what you set as boundaries.

[00:12:44]: Ultimately, for me, I was so busy every single day and I was trying to prioritize, you know, especially with a situation like a death case when you have families who are literally crumbling because they’re so devastated, but ultimately, my role there is to ensure child safety of the existing children that may still remain in the home or their future children and just to make sure, maybe they didn’t do anything intentional, but I also have to educate them on how something like this doesn’t move forward.

[00:13:18]: So, for me, I mean to manage those boundaries and to, kind of, maintain that separation so I don’t get overly emotionally involved is just simply to prioritize and to have compassion, but keep the goal in mind that it is about child safety.

TOM OATES [00:13:37]: And let’s not paint a picture here of that, that the three of you are here to sit there and give me all your woe is me stories, because, at the same time, there is a, you know, there, there’s a need that you’re looking to serve and there’s a good place where all of this is coming from. You may not be able to save the world today, but like Marla talked about, you can try to save one person at a time. And maybe even saving isn’t the right word, but you’re there to help.

[00:14:06]: And there’s gotta be, Marla, those points where also - and while you may not be in direct casework practice right now - that you take with you and say, you know what, even in my day to day work today, there’s a good being done and letting that resonate, you know, and letting that, while you wanna create boundaries, letting that sink in has gotta be something that you’re still taking away.
MARLA BELIAN [00:14:28]: Oh, absolutely, I think, you know, in the work that we do now here at Gateway, you really wanna help educate on the good practices and the good work that people are doing out there so that even if we’re not doing the work ourselves today, that it can be done and that the good influence can kind of trickle down that way. I think the work that we’ve done in the past and the work that we’re doing now, I mean, absolutely will stay with us moving forward.

TOM OATES [00:14:57]: What are some of those things that still stick with you when you look at, you know, moments that you’ll take with you that impacted lives?

MARLA BELIAN [00:15:04]: Well, if you’re asking me, I almost have to stop and think for a moment because I think each of us have worked with so many individual clients and when you ask that question it’s like these individual little moments that come forward. For me, I’ve always enjoyed working with the older teens because, you know, they’ve been through a lot but they also have the ability to recognize why you are there with them and you can help teach them in a way where you can really actively see them taking the skills that they’ve learned from you with them.

[00:15:46]: Whether that be just, you know, a moment of conflict management resolution or helping them get enrolled into a program, or these little things that, you know, sometimes you can see the change happen immediately or right in front of you, but sometimes you just have the ability to drop little nuggets or conversation that just maybe the teen or youth will come back to in ten years of time when you’re completely out of their life.

[00:16:13]: There’s just, there’s so many aspects and different ways to answer that question that, you know, I don’t mean to provide a rambling response, but it just, it helps, it makes me feel like I think of so many kids that we’ve worked with and families that we’ve touched along the way, but that in particular is one aspect of it.

TOM OATES [00:16:33]: You know, and, and you’ve used the word ‘we’ which, which kind of, leads us on to where you had touched on this a few minutes ago and I wanna, kind of, get back to it now about working across the systems. And so, that’s, that’s my gosh - either juvenile justice or education or healthcare or the courts - that you’ve got to just in your day to day work deal with all of these other aspects that, that are within human services. So, when you’re trying to talk to somebody who is, is young and, and they’re new and they’re trying to make sense of this new role that they’re in - what’s the most important aspect that you would tell somebody about working with those other professionals and those other systems?

MARLA BELIAN [00:17:17]: I would say that teaming is everything. You know, you may be the lead social worker on a case, but the reality is that you don’t have to and really shouldn’t be replying to every single issue on your own. In the world of Child Welfare, everything is a crisis. But, if you can lean on your team members to help resolve some of the smaller issues or some of the things going on in a child’s life, maybe it doesn’t have to become such a crisis.

[00:17:50]: And if you can lean on those team members, too, there’s also this aspect of information sharing where, you know, your relationship with a client that you have may be very different than a relationship that a mentor has with a youth or that their lawyer has with the youth. And the youth may choose to share information with one of the other team members that’s important to you while you’re
making you decisions about a permanency and recommendations for permanency - so if you can lean on them and help, you know, really get the whole picture, it makes a big difference.

**TOM OATES [00:18:19]**: You just mentioned about sharing information because if one person has one part of the story or a little bit more it can value everyone else across the team. How did you maintain communication to try to do that effectively?

**MARLA BELIAN [00:18:33]**: It’s not always easy. Like we’ve kind of mentioned before, you know, you have high caseloads and every caseload has x number of people in it and these x number of people want to talk to you at all times. But, if you can establish yourself and establish your reputation as someone that is going to be responsive, even if you can’t be responsive in that moment, but you can establish the reputation where they know that you’re gonna call them back. Or, they know that you will get to them when you can, it really helps build that trust and then that trust helps develop the relationships across teams.

[00:19:08]: And really just making sure that you’re in communication so that when you do have downtime, even a simple check-in, hey I haven’t talked to you in a while, you know, how are you seeing things going with this client and/or youth - those types of connections and, kind of, moments of reaching out make a big difference because I think these, when you’re in a small - whether urban or rural - environment, you’re going to work with these professionals again and again on one case, two cases, however many across the time that you’re in the field.

**TOM OATES [00:19:40]**: So, they’re incredibly valuable and clearly it’s, it’s that teamwork that helps get things done. For somebody new, Kelly - they are just on the job and it’s just in their first few weeks - what’s the first, kind of, step you would tell them to start to develop those trusting relationship across teams?

**KELLY CANTER [00:19:58]**: So, you know, I would echo a lot of what Marla said, I thought she articulated it really well. I think that when you first start, you probably don’t have a full caseload, probably. So, it’s a great opportunity to be able to slowly develop those relationships when you have time. So, I would say recognizing, as Marla said, that you will likely work with these people throughout your time as a Child Welfare professional, I think establishing good rapport - and that’s, you know, simply good social work skills - you know, utilizing those to, you know, build those, kind of, informal relationships because you know you’re gonna depend on them in the future.

[00:20:47]: You know, I think that reaching out, doing those check-ins saying, or doing what you say you’re going to do, establishing credibility and working with integrity. I mean, I think it’s really easy because this is a world of often crisis, everyone is, kind of, at the height of stress across the board and so, being someone that people know they can turn to that they’re going to do good work and they’re going to follow through with what they said they were going to do, I think is really critical. Being a positive voice and team member is really for the benefit of children and families, honestly.

**TOM OATES [00:21:29]**: You know, there’s a point of what we’ve talked about of, you know, bracing yourself for something different and dealing with the new role, which may be part of, but not encompassing everything that somebody learned in school. So, Kari, we’re talking about managing your time and, and managing your energy. And so, there’s a lot placed on somebody’s emotion, a lot placed
on somebody’s - you know, like Kelly mentioned - bias. What would you suggest to future caseworkers that they kind of ask themselves before really diving in?

**KARI KRYDA** [00:22:04]: Yeah, as we’ve discussed, I mean, social work in general is just a myriad of different experiences, it can be scary, sad, happy. So, kind of, walking into that head on, what I wish I knew at that time was how important - and I know Kelly touched on this earlier - but, how vital it is to really set aside cultural differences, religious differences, personal upbringings. I mean, I think we can all agree that parents take parenting criticisms very difficult and so when you have someone coming into your home that you don’t know, that can be upsetting.

[00:22:50]: So, you’re constantly dealing with these, these situations that are invasive and personal. So, I think when you walk into a house and you’re a new social worker, I think you have to ask yourself are you ready to be compassionate, can you deal with a job that you’re definitely not going to be working 9-5 - that’s a guarantee - and can you be forward? And that’s, that’s not with a negative connotation, just forward because you’re asking very personal questions to a person that you have never met and that you’re going to be working with however, you know, long you’re involved with their family.

[00:23:31]: So, I think really the key is when you’re getting started you really have to separate your personal experiences, your personal beliefs and really walk into this with an open mind.

**TOM OATES** [00:23:42]: And, you know, as much as you’re, you know, kind of really asking somebody to be reflective and to kind of understand themselves and do I have these, you know, these specific traits, how will I react in these situations - Marla said earlier, you’re not in this alone.

[00:23:58]: And so, I wanna kind of now shift a little bit and talk about those supervisors that are just as busy and have to deal with these new folks coming in - what can you do as a supervisor to, kind of, support them? So, guys - Marla, let’s start with you, because you do have, you know, supervisory experience that you mentioned, not to say everybody doesn’t, especially in all the roles we have. What would you recommend for supervisors to do to help those new caseworkers adjust to the job?

**MARLA BELIAN** [00:24:30]: I would recommend just to the best of your ability helping new works get organized before they’re given however many number of cases. I think getting organized first, understanding all the paperwork and documentation and things that go into it, it’s kind of those baseline skills that really going to set you up for success in the future.

[00:24:55]: I think also, as a supervisor, you can really model for your workers ways to prioritize the needs of all of the clients and all of the professionals that we see on a day to day basis. And then also just really encouraging new staff to ask for help when they need. Because, they’re going to be out there in the field, but just because they’re out there in the field doesn’t me that they’re by themselves. You have a phone, you can call for help if you’re not sure how to manage a situation.

[00:25:24]: And really just, finally, just emphasizing safety. For your worker overall and you know, you don’t need to put yourself in an unsafe situation trying to address a client’s need if it’s, like I said, if it’s going to put you in an unsafe situation.

**TOM OATES** [00:25:40]: Kari, what would you recommend?
KARI KRYDA [00:25:42]: I would definitely - piggybacking off of what Marla said, and I should have touched on this earlier - but, teamwork makes the dream work. I really, really believe that, you know, you make your connections with, whether it’s law enforcement officers, or the doctors, or a Child Protection team - whoever you’re working with - to really encourage those relationships and build on those relationships because, ultimately, when you’re out in the field and you’re by yourself, you depend a lot on each other.

[00:26:13]: And really, it makes the experience a lot more enjoyable and you can then utilize those resources and offer them to the family, which will benefit them long term, so I definitely emphasize teamwork and when you have a high caseload, sometimes that’s the only way you can get stuff done.

TOM OATES [00:26:30]: Right, right. And, Kelly?

KELLY CANTER [00:26:32]: So, I would say all, you know, I would also echo all of what they said. I think having, the best supervisors that I’ve had really held an open door policy. I know that I could reach out to them at any time. We didn’t text back then, but they had their phone with them all the time. I mean, I remember calling them at all hours of the night and going into their office to brainstorm or to ask questions or what would they do in this situation.

[00:27:07]: I mean, I think having a supervisor that you really respect and trust - and as Marla said - that modeled a lot of good social work practice, modeled prioritization, modeled organization and modeled compassion, provided ways for you to think about situations differently. I think that I grew the most during those times when I was able to reflect on what I’d done and what I would want to do differently the next time.

TOM OATES [00:27:38]: I wanna, I wanna wrap this up with one, kind of, final question for everybody, again, and you’ve, you’ve used the phrase, you know, looking back, or you know, with a few more years, or now as everybody’s career paths have kind of widened and gone in different directions - and, and Marla, if it’s okay I’ll start with you by asking the question, you know, based on the thought of if I knew then what I know now, what would you go back and tell yourself?

MARLA BELIAN [00:28:03]: Probably that it’s okay not to be perfect and that this is a hard job and you don’t have to be responsive to everybody the second that they want you to be. It’s gonna take time to develop those skills and that’s okay.

TOM OATES [00:28:21]: Alright. Kari, what would you, what would you tell that younger self?

KARI KRYDA [00:28:24]: I would definitely emphasize to take it a day at a time - sometimes an hour at a time - you know, focus on prioritizing, because sometimes you can’t get it all done, sometime you have to reach out to team members for support or a supervisor. And it’s a stressful environment, so I think you just have to take it as it comes and do what you can.

TOM OATES [00:28:47]: Kelly?

KELLY CANTER [00:28:48]: So, I think that, I mean I really struggled with trying to be everything to everybody at all times and I think that I wanted it to be, wanted the answers to be a lot more black and white than they were and I think that leaving room for growing and learning and developing through a
lot of gray areas. Recognizing that working with humans is rewarding and complex and often challenging but that it is a time when you learn the most and the quickest of what you’re, you know, what you are capable of and the difference that you can make.

[00:29:34]: And kind of building off of those moments when, you know, you are able to get through to a family or make a decision that really matters or build a better relationship with the guardian ad litem, like those things really make the job worth it.

TOM OATES [00:29:52]: Folks, I really wanna thank Kelly, Marla and Kari for being a part of this. They, they represent a small segment of a lot of hard working people who bring a lot of different experiences and great diversity of thought to Child Welfare Information Gateway and so, for them to, to share their experience - especially in this manner - because we are dealing with high turnover and we are dealing with, with folks who are, like I said before, they are the boots on the ground, they are the, the front facing edge of Child Welfare.

[00:30:25]: So, Kelly, Marla and Kari, guys thank you guys so much, I appreciate you being a part of this and to let folks know that Information Gateway is a heck of a lot more than my voice, here, so, guys, appreciate the time and thank you guys for being part of the podcast.

MARLA BELIAN [00:30:43]: Thanks, Tom.

KARI KRYDA [00:30:43]: Thanks, Tom.

KELLY CANTER [00:30:45]: Thank you!

TOM OATES [00:30:48]: There is a series of really helpful videos on Child Welfare Information Gateway called “Realistic Job Previews”. Now, they’re developed by states to provide a look inside their unique Child Welfare agencies. Now, they're realistic in that they provide a balanced view of the rewards and the demands of the work. Twenty states have realistic job previews on Gateway and some states have more than one video posted. You know, states will use these videos for recruiting and for screening. But, if you’re seriously considering or on your path toward a career in Child Welfare, I highly recommend that you take a look.

[00:31:25]: Now, on this podcast’s web page, just go to www.acf.hhs.gov/cb and search ‘podcasts’, we’ll have a link to the Realistic Job Previews page on www.childwelfare.gov, along with where you can listen to an episode that we recorded where we talked with a 30 year veteran of Child Welfare from Georgia, Sekema Harmon, and she talked about the changes that she’s seen in the field and her growth as a professional.

[00:31:51]: So, if you are new to the field, I suggest you just go and check out www.childwelfare.gov. Not only will you find great resources to help your work, but also valuable information that you can share with families, plus a series of databases that include contact lists from some of your peers and partner organizations across the country. There’s also a full database of state statutes that address Child Welfare, so you can see what not only the laws are in your state, but your neighboring states and compare and contrast. Also, there are tools and training that can support your professional development as you advance in your career.
[00:32:27]: So, I wanna thank Kelly Canter, Marla Belian and Kari Kryda for their help and time in sharing their stories and guidance with us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. And of course, thank you for listening and being a part of this community. I’m Tom Oates, have a great day!