

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
Foster Care: A Path to Reunification – Part 2 TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Margo Fudge, San Diego County Children's Services; Valesha Bullock, San Diego County Children's Services; Kim Giardina, San Diego County Children's Services

[00:00:00]: [Music Introduction]

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:02]: 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 [00:00:33]: This may be the most example-filled episode of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast we've ever produced. Now, we're always looking for effective methods, tools, and lessons that improve services and outcomes for children and families, and this conversation has plenty.

[00:00:51]: Tom Oates here, and welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. This is the second of two episodes discussing foster care as a support to families instead of a replacement for parents. The effort is being championed by the Children's Bureau that foster care and related services can protect children but also – when applied to meet a family's unique needs – can support faster reunification.

[00:01:17]: In this conversation, we're going to California. No surprise, the children's services of San Diego County encompass a wide array of supports and programs, but we'll dive into the work around adoption, foster care, and the services for foster and adoptive resource families. There, resource families are leveraged – along with the array of partners and community support services – to aid in strengthening birth families and supporting the entire family toward reunification.

[00:01:46]: Now we'll start the conversation talking about those partners and how they are applied on a regional basis across the county, but also listen out for the types of trainings and support to resource families, how the county is taking advantage of the available infrastructure within the state, and how birth families and older youth have a voice in the process and are able to share their stories to improve how resource families can support the children in their care.

[00:02:11]: We're gonna be joined by some heavy hitters within the county's children's services. Margo Fudge is a Protective Services Program Manager of the county's Adoptions and Foster and Adoptive Resource Family Services. Valesha Bullock is the Deputy Director for Resource Family Programs, Adoptions, and Foster Care home licensing. And Kim Giardina is the Deputy Director for Policy and Program support and child welfare eligibility. So many examples to support resource families, strengthen birth families, and bring partners together in this episode. Now, I'm really, really glad we're able to bring this conversation to you, so we won't wait any further, hope you enjoy our look at San Diego County's approach to using foster care as a path to reunification here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

[00:03:01]: So, Margo, I want to start with you because San Diego itself - and folks listening across the country may just think San Diego the city - but San Diego County is so huge and so diverse, it is not just

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the city on the West Coast, it expands so far east and we were talking before we recorded about each of the regions that you've got in your county and you're able to bring in community collaboratives to help support those local families to each region - could you walk me through those community collaboratives and how they're working with your child and family teams?

MARGO FUDGE [00:03:37]: Yeah, so we do have a very diverse county - you know, geographically it's the size of, I think Connecticut, or something, it's a huge county - and so, within the county we have, you know, pockets of whether it's different types of immigrants, we have a lot of Indian reservation that are here in the county and so it's really important for us to work collaboratively with community partners. I think our county has done a really good job reaching out to those resources and ensuring that we have those supports for our families.

[00:04:08]: So, our child and family team meetings are a relatively new concept, we rolled that out in 2017, but it's, you know, a shift from how we used to do it. It's a really, really important meeting for us to obtain the voice of the child and the family while bringing in those community collaboratives and support so that we can tailor the work that we're doing to those families. So, those meetings are held at every major decision point and have really been helpful for us to build the family relationship early on in our cases.

TOM OATES [00:04:39]: So, one of the things you touched base on is tailoring the services for that particular family, and part of that also means supporting those children. And, as much as foster care in the past may have been looked at as, let's protect the child, let's make sure the child is in another family setting - but, then there's this idea and this new concept, and it's not that new, of normalcy, of keeping the child in their community, in their normal routine and that helps support them and helps that transition.

[00:05:12]: Valesha, you've got this task of trying to keep children in that community and trying to maintain that normalcy - what are the big things that you're able to try to do to keep that, kind of, element, that day to day element for those children consistent as possible?

VELISHA BULLOCK [00:05:27]: Well, the biggest part is just working with the regions to make sure that we all are on the same page when it comes to, when we're looking for placement for the children that they maintain in their natural setting. So, you know, I really task my resource family approval team to connect with the regions or if they have a resource that they want a child to be placed in that we really try to work with a primary placement, as well as a secondary placement so that we can maintain those kids in the community.

[00:05:57]: And it's hugely a team effort because they have to really start the process in region and we have to sort of pick it up on the backend. And, with that, I believe you're allowing the voice of the child to be heard, the voice of the families to be heard, you're making sure that the child maintains in their same community as well as schools and things of that nature. So, that's a priority for us in general, you know, the first thing we really want to make sure the kid can remain with the family, but if that is not the case, then obviously you want to make sure they're with a relative or somebody they know, or somebody if they, their church or whatever that may be and if they can't exactly be with anybody they absolutely know, then we definitely try to find somebody who is in their community to make sure that they can stay in their natural environment.

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TOM OATES [00:06:46]: How difficult is that for you guys, you know, Margo and Kim, you two as well, about not only making sure that there are enough resource families and you are able to bring in that extra support? Even though San Diego is a big county, each of those regions, it's still difficult to recruit. How are you guys able to maintain that there is enough support, kind of, within your arsenal to be able to provide that consistency?

MARGO FUDGE [00:07:14]: So, we have a dedicated team of recruiters, which I think has been really helpful, that work in the regions and the communities. We have people dedicated and assigned to different locations throughout the county. And so their focus is really on kind of our higher end youth, whether that's youth with behavioral emotional challenges, our children of color, sibling sets and medically fragile - so, really focused on identifying homes, that's usually our greatest struggle is finding homes for those children, as well as older youth.

[00:07:49]: So, I think we have a good program in place to do that, we do a lot of media outreach with a local news station. In 2018, we recruited at 31 different community fairs, so I think we get a lot of interest from that. The way we now bring families in through our resource family approval has been, you know, a little bit of a challenge, but I think we're at a point now where we've worked out most of those kinks and we're able to get people through that process.

[00:08:19]: We're gonna talk, I think, about our relationships with the community college and the training and the other supports that we provide for our families as they go through the process, so, I think having those recruiters to kind of start it and then be attached to help families, shepherd them through the process is very helpful.

TOM OATES [00:08:35]: Yeah, in a little bit, we'll put a pin in that for later in the conversation, I want to address and talk to you and pull out a little bit more about how you are able to support those resource families and bring them in as partners. But, I want to shift a little bit to an approach that you've apparently taken and it really deals with from a couple of different angles in incorporating this trauma informed care because not only are we talking about moving the child to a safe place or addressing the family's needs - we're talking about in terms of day to day consistency - but realizing that you need to meet a family and child where they are. And that means everything that they bring to the table.

[00:09:17]: And so, this trauma-informed work that you're dealing with - with both the children and your staff - Kim, talk to me about incorporating this throughout the agency - what's been done to ensure trauma informed practice is applied across agency?

KIM GIARDINA [00:09:33]: Yeah, well I think you're really right, that it is looking at it from both perspectives, right? How do we ensure that the trauma that children and families are involved in our system may experience is minimized as much as possible. And then also, how do we address the trauma that our staff might experience just from the work, the nature of the work that we do.

[00:09:53]: So, we have been on this journey since about 2012, we started participating with Casey Family Programs in a breakthrough series collaborative on trauma-informed practice. And we had a team that included our resource families, parent partner, former foster youth and our child welfare staff to really develop some specific strategies that we tested out and then whichever ones worked, we spread, you know, for us to use countywide.

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[00:10:25]: So, I think it's been, you know, something we are constantly refining, you know, we update things as we have new ideas, how do we really keep that trauma focused lens throughout all of the work that we do. At this point, we have developed what we call Safety Enhanced Together, which is our practice framework and we call it SET for sure, so - you know, we love our acronyms in child welfare - and SET, for us, we use our practice framework to really describe the what, the why and the how of our work. So, it is our vision, our values, our guiding principles and then specific practice behaviors that workers, supervisors and managers are expected to demonstrate. And, trauma-informed principles are infused throughout that practice framework.

[00:11:13]: So, really thinking about how do we keep kids in a familiar environment if they have to be removed from their family, how do they stay connected to familiar people and places that encourage them to thrive? How do we think about instantly creating visitation opportunities so that parents and children can see each other very quickly. And we've worked with our resource families, we have some fantastic families who are great at building those relationships from the very beginning, day one, call to the parents, tell me about your child.

[00:11:43]: One of the things we've implemented is a form that we call the All About Me Form and actually at the removal of the child, the parent gives us that information so that it can be passed on to the resource family. We've done a lot of training with our staff - so we use training curriculum through the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, we're actually in a pilot right now of a new set of curriculum that they have developed, so we're working on that.

[00:12:09]: And, a couple of years ago, we had a lot of support - we are part of a larger Health and Human Services Agency and we're an integrated Health and Human Services Agency. And our agency director made the decision that our entire agency was gonna practice from a trauma-informed lens. So, families who are involved with CalWORKS or Medi-Cal, with Public Health, with Behavioral Health - we're all talking the same language, we're all looking at this trauma-informed lens and how we interact with our families.

[00:12:38]: So, that's been very beneficial. I think on the staff side, we've tried to look at a lot of components around supporting and addressing secondary trauma. We do have a child welfare staff psychologist who helps, she does a lot of debriefs with staff when we have critical incidents or high-profile incidents, she's available to help staff get connected to other resources that we have like our Employee Assistance Program, if some more longer term assistance is needed.

[00:13:07]: We've been able to do a lot of coaching support for staff. So, we have coaches in all of our regions that can really help them. So, again, it's, you know, looking at it from both those perspectives.

TOM OATES [00:13:19]: I'd love to get a sense from you over time as you've looked at this journey and how it's formed and, you know kind of, a little bit of the trial and error or a little bit of giving it some time and seeing how the culture changes. What's the kind of impacts - when you start thinking about this different approach - what are kind of those first stories that pop into mind when you look at it and say yea, this was, we're on the right path, here?

KIM GIARDINA [00:13:41]: Well, I think you know, some of the first stories I think about, we really started to pay attention to that concept of keeping kids in their familiar environment. And we really

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focused specifically on their connection with their school of origin. Right, so, how do we keep them in a placement where they can go to the same school, so, the very next day, they're back with the same teacher, back with the same friends. You know, that's not always the best for every child, but I think for most children it is and we, you know, have had some wonderful stories of children who were involved in the school play and, you know, at our intervention it just wasn't safe for them to remain in their home anymore. But we were able to keep them in a placement in their same community and they went back to their school and were able to finish and be in that play and it just meant so much to them and really, I think, reduced the trauma they experienced from having to be removed from their home.

[00:14:39]: I think for our staff, I get emails all the time - I supervise our staff psychologist - and I just get the most heartfelt emails about how wonderful they feel when she's able to come out, you know, when they have had, maybe, a child pass away on their caseload or you know, another really critical incident that occurs and she's able to come out and spend some time and talk to them and help normalize their feelings around it and also help them understand, you know, how to move forward.

[00:15:13]: We've done a lot of work with our supervisors and our managers so that also in those critical moments they can take on some other tasks so that worker really has time to, you know, manage that, the incident that happened and I think they've really felt the support during those times.

TOM OATES [00:15:30]: That's fabulous. And I'm just curious - you may not have any insight on the numbers, but - has that impacted staff turnover? Have you seen a reduction or, you know, in terms of, you know, staff turnover is a huge issue for child welfare - is it having an impact there?

KIM GIARDINA [00:15:46]: You know, it's been a little bit hard for us to tell whether it's directly impacted our retention. In San Diego, we've traditionally always had a somewhat lower turnover rate than other jurisdictions. We have about a ten to fifteen percent turnover rate, which is pretty low for child welfare anyways, so I don't know that we've seen a huge shift in the numbers there. But I think what we hear from staff is just as this work gets more and more complex, you know, it becomes even more critical to provide those supports.

TOM OATES [00:16:23]: Yeah. Well, there's this theme I'm hearing and it is this, you know kind of, backend support, really for that you're mentioning the staff and the caseworkers and clearly doing the same thing, as much as you can, for the children to allow them to have that normalcy, be it the school play or be it to try to maintain some consistency.

[00:16:42]: But then, as Margo touched base earlier, just a few minutes ago, we're also talking about supporting those resource families, who not only are we talking about recruiting and retaining, but then bringing them into the process and bringing them on as partners, especially when you're dealing with - like, as everybody here mentioned - trying to ensure that we're talking about relative or paternal caregivers coming in from the family. Margo, what's been done that you guys have done to kind of maintain a stronger connection and engagement with those resource families?

MARGO FUDGE [00:17:16]: Yeah, so I think with the resource family approval initiative that started recently, we now are, everybody is going through the process the same, whether it's community members or kin, right? So, one of the greatest supports, I think, is the training that they receive. They're

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all required to go through our trauma-informed pre-service training, which is 12 hours that really talks about what is it like to be a resource parent, but really hitting the trauma.

[00:17:44]: I think a lot of people that haven't been exposed to the child welfare system and come to us, you know, to kind of give back, don't truly understand what these children have experienced. And many of have the relatives, you know, don't understand either. So, I think, getting them in and giving them the training has been really helpful, we have a wonderful partnership with a local community college that provides other trainings for our families, as well, that they're required to have, annual training hours, and so they can select from a number of trainings that are available to them.

[00:18:15]: We also have specialty classes for families that are willing to provide permanency that really focus on attachment issues for maybe families that weren't able to conceive themselves, working through kind of the loss that they feel as they come to our system to try to adopt. So, I think that's been a really great partnership.

[00:18:35]: And then, once families take placement, we have a lot of great supports to help stabilize the child in the home. Our children can be very challenging for people, in terms of, you know, being able to parent, especially if they've maybe never parented before - so we have several different programs that come into the home, provide support, in home therapy, parenting techniques, really to model, kind of, hands on so that the caregivers are able to get that support and stabilize placements so we minimize turnover and kind of that change of placement.

[00:19:07]: Did anyone else, I wanted to see if anyone else had anything else to add to that question.

VELISHA BULLOCK [00:19:13]: Yeah, I could add. We also have our Quality Parenting Initiative, which is something that we have really been working very closely with Youth Loss Center here in California - well, now it's national - and it really sort of hones us into working with our youth, working with our birth parents, working with our resource families, you know, working with our community partners so that we can surround the resource family in the ability to try to maintain that child in their care.

[00:19:45]: It's very helpful when we actually have a quarterly meeting with our staff, as well as any collaborative partners and we also bring in youth and the parents to be able to provide an opportunity where we can hear what is happening with our resource families and be able to either incorporate change the way that we approach our families and provide some support.

[00:20:13]: We've been doing this probably since about 2012, we've, are actually one of the leading counties in working with QPI - and QPI means Quality Parenting Initiative, again, I want to make sure, our acronyms are so crazy here with child welfare - but, that has been something that we have actually just embraced and it's been very beneficial to be able to have our resource families come back in and provide a voice, it helps us be able to make sure that we, you know, work with them much closer and working like with, you know, like Margo had said earlier, with we have a lot of children that are pretty challenging.

[00:20:53]: And also, we're also trying to see if we can bring a different version of Quality Parenting Initiative to our FFA's, who also - we contract with our foster family agencies to provide care - and they're actually trying to incorporate some form of process through their agencies, as well.

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TOM OATES [00:21:11]: There is an overarching partnership, you know, across the board, as, you know, we talked about community collaboratives when we first started and clearly there's partnerships within the process, because we hear, you know, you're hearing from your resource families on the sharing of the youth and the birth parents family sharing, so this, kind of, you've got collaboration at various levels within the relationships themselves and also within the systems.

[00:21:37]: But then there's a separate one and you touched on it earlier, and, Valesha, I'd like you to pull this apart because it's very unique, at least when you guys said it to me, it raised my eyebrows - about partnering with a community college, partnering with an entity, I believe it's Grossmont College, from what I'm remembering - what does that look like, well first off, how did that come to be, and now what does that look like?

VELISHA BULLOCK [00:22:01]: It came to be several years ago and it was more or less, we had a lot of families that needed a little bit of extra training that our staff weren't able to provide at that initial time. And, it really started off with more of our adoption classes, initially - I'm dating myself, here - it started off with a little bit more support to be able to provide our agency and our families with a little extra training when they actually have a child in home.

[00:22:35]: So, like Margo talked about earlier, the very first one was more about informing infertility, that was one of our major trainings that we had to deal with, we had a lot of families coming to our agency wanting to know, you know, or even providing like - they had this concept in their minds regarding adoption and if they could get this brand new baby, that would be fine, but then, you know, some, you get a child with a sibling set or a family that has a sibling set and you have different challenges with different children and if you don't have a family that is prepared to be an adoptive parent for multiple children, in their head they were only thinking about being a parent of one child - this class offered up, you know, some issues with that, as well as if they, if they did not receive a placement in time, or if they were looking for a specific child, what is it that you need to work through so that we can get you to a place where that you can parent multiple children?

[00:23:31]: So, that's where it initially started and it has pretty much evolved from there. It went from, you know, working with loss and grief for a child who comes into a home, it went to working with a family who may have a more challenged child or a special needs child or a sibling set of children - we just added some of those trainings with Grossmont to be able to embrace some of those. Some of those trainings we've now changed or we've evolved with our current process of how we're dealing with children.

[00:24:01]: We also have, you know, they also did a mentorship, we had some, you know, foster parents mentoring other foster parents so that they could understand, you know, what it takes and what it looks like to be a foster parent. That was really, really successful and we continue to do that - I think a lot of our foster parent associations just sort of do it on their own now without really being involved with Grossmont - but they are the entity where a lot of this feedback can come back and bring it back to our agency.

TOM OATES [00:24:32]: Margo and Kim, I'll open it up for you, as well, kind of, who else is in this, kind of, huge room of partners that you guys are dealing with, it sounds like on a near daily basis?

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KIM GIARDINA [00:24:43]: Yeah, I think, I just want to add, too, a little bit about, you know, our partnership with Grossmont College. So, you know, Valesha has talked a lot about the partnership we built locally, but, the infrastructure really came from some legislation that passed in early 2000. So, there's actually a statewide infrastructure with community colleges throughout the state and the state funds those community colleges to provide the initial training that all resource families receive.

[00:25:09]: So, once we had that infrastructure in place, it really gave us the opportunity to then build that local partnership and expand. So, in addition to Grossmont College offering the training for new resource families, we've been able to work with them and develop a partnership here to do that ongoing training and identify specific needs for our county, so I think that was a great way for the state to support us, as well.

[00:25:34]: A few other partners that we've had here - we have a project, and initiative called Project Keep, that has also been going on for multiple years. It's an evidence-based practice and it actually started as a grant with the Child and Adolescent Services Research Center here in San Diego, which is a partnership of multiple universities who conduct research in child and adolescent well-being. And this project, you know, we started as a pilot to see how it would work and it really focuses on reducing the stress that resource families experience. And what they've found is that resource families can sort of handle five stressful incidents in a day with our kids. But, for some reason, when six, number six comes, that's when things don't work so well anymore.

[00:26:25]: So, it is a series of group sessions where the resource families come together and talk about their experiences and then build specific skills. If the resource family is unable to make the group session, the provider actually makes a home visit to make sure they don't miss that part of curriculum and they stay caught up. And then, it builds that support network so they get to know one each other and build that support system.

[00:26:50]: Once the grant ended, we had such success that we actually completed a procurement of this project. So, say San Diego has run this project for many years, now they actually operate it entirely without the county, so that's been fantastic, they just, we work with them to send our families over, but they run the project all on their own.

[00:27:11]: We also have a partnership with our YMCA to support our relative caregivers. So, they run our navigator kinship programs and kinship support groups, our emergency fund, you know, sometimes, when we call auntie and say, hey, we've got your niece and nephew here, can we bring them, you know, she's like, yeah, but I need beds. So, how do we get those? So, we have an emergency fund to help supply families with what they need right away so kids don't have to delay in that placement.

[00:27:40]: They also run our childcare bridge program, which provides up to six months of emergency child care funds for caregivers. So, we've had some really great partnerships and I think, I don't know, Margo, if you have others you want to add.

MARGO FUDGE [00:27:52]: Yeah, so, I wanted to touch on our partnership with Promises to Kids, which is a local non-profit. They do a lot for our children here in care providing funding if the child wants to go to prom, or they want a class ring - sort of those miscellaneous items, that again kind of goes back to normalcy - but helping fund those special things for youth.

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[00:28:15]: They're also the partner for our Camp Connect Program, which is a partnership that we have that we started about ten years ago for kids in care who are separated from one or more of their siblings. So, they provide the funding to do monthly activities with the youth and take them really fun places, whether it's local amusement parks or, you know, Sea World and sporting events, stuff like that and then there's camping and we're gonna go to the mountains this year and go tubing and stuff like that.

[00:28:44]: So, that's been a really great partnership to allow, we know siblings remaining connected is really important to kids in care. And, then, we also have really, really great partnerships with our foster parent associations. So, Valesha had touched on that earlier, but we have two really strong associations in San Diego where foster parents can go to get - whether it's donated items, they do toy drives and they can get, you know, new items for the holidays. And we work very closely, we have monthly meetings with our, sort of, lead foster parents to really elicit their voice, what are their needs and then how can we help support them, we know the work is not easy. So, those are some of the partnerships that I wanted to touch on.

TOM OATES [00:29:26]: Just some. And I'll put in a plug for those listening to check out one of our earlier podcasts where we actually talked about the Kinship Navigator Program with the YMCA of San Diego. So, you brought them up and it brought back a few memories of chatting with them and the work that they do across, across the county.

[00:29:45]: But, I want to shift a little bit, because we've spent a lot of time, and rightfully so, on supports for those resource families. But, as we start to see the shift in foster care from not being a replacement for the parents, but a support for the families that, you know, you're starting to incorporate, which I think is very, it is going, it goes back to, you know, supporting resource families, but giving them that perspective from former foster youth and birth parents - how much, Kim, has that really had an impact, and where are you actually being able to kind of infuse their voice into supporting resource families?

KIM GIARDINA [00:30:25]: Yeah, I mean I think there are a few ways that we've done that. So we, we started the conversation earlier talking about child and family team meetings, you know, and in those meetings, everybody who cares about that child and the child themselves come to those meetings. And so, it's really one of those places where everybody's voice is equal and everybody gets an opportunity to really share and learn from one another and ensure that the child and their family can advocate for, you know, where they want the direction of their case to go in, what their needs are and how to meet those needs.

[00:31:03]: We've also tried to just, as a system, incorporate the youth, the voice of our youth and voice of birth parents, as well. So, we have parent partners that we use throughout our system, one of our contracts, we call it Community Services for Families, they have parent partners in every single one of our regions, and so at the very beginning of a case that's being opened, the birth parent can get connected with a parent partner, who can help that birth parent learn how to, you know, just kind of navigate our system, be that liaison, it's also sort of that support, I've been in your shoes, I know what this is like, I know this can be difficult, here's how it can work best.

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[00:31:45]: And they often help bridge that gap between the resource parent and the birth parent to really start that relationship from the very beginning. We also try to model that type of relationship from our system. So, a few years ago, we began rolling out mental health screening for all foster youth and - we call it Pathways to Wellbeing - and so, when we began that, the way we even set up the training that we did, we had a child welfare staff, a behavioral health staff and a parent partner who all trained together so that the voice of the parent was part of, you know, this is what it means to be on a child and family team, this is what it means to talk about the mental health needs of myself and my children. So, we really try to model that from a system perspective.

TOM OATES [00:32:31]: There has got to be a number of different advantages of having that voice and not only having the perspective, but walking somebody through their shoes and you mentioned the parent partners, as well, being part of the training for caseworkers and this is for, you know, as we're starting to see the partnerships where everyone not only comes to the table, but then shares a role. You're just starting to see where it can - not to say it has or it has not - but it can impact legislation, it can impact policy, it definitely impacts people in understanding and sharing those stories. Margo and Valesha both for the two of you, what are you seeing in terms of providing that voice - and we talked about the parents voice, but the you also have the older youth and that perspective, as well - what's been the biggest benefit, or the ways you were able to incorporate those benefits in supporting really this entire cycle of the youth, the birth parent and the resource family?

VELISHA BULLOCK [00:33:32]: I'll go ahead and start that off. It's, to me, it's hugely beneficial because we are now able to understand what they are wanting when they're in placement or with kin. They are able to see the network of support that they're involved with. You know, it sort of helps them get through our very difficult court process and understand that, you know, when you start talking at the beginning, like Kim talked about through the CFT and you get to more of the permanency or adoption component, this child has been in those CFTs to be able to address those and be able to know that here is the plan, or is a part of that plan that where I'm going to be in the long run.

[00:34:23]: So if reunification doesn't work out for this child, they actually now know, here is my final plan and here's how I want it and here's how I would like for it to look like. So, I think it's definitely huge and of course now that we have the new process with RFA you know, we're trying to loop that back in very quickly because now we're asking more than one relative to be a part of the CFT - if the child wishes it to be. Because then that network will, it sort of expands on both levels and be able to provide a more holistic support system for that child.

TOM OATES [00:34:59]: So, you brought up a lot of this great data and in child welfare, we love the evaluation, and a lot of that was the qualitative data. Kim, let me toss it back to you for quantitative data. What are the kind of results that you've seen in terms of the numbers that you're able to turn back to management, turn back to administration, send it up to Sacramento and say, here are the impacts of what we're seeing - when you turn around and say, here's our success, what is the data telling you?

KIM GIARDINA [00:35:26]: Yeah, so, you know, we've done a lot of work to really take a look both at the qualitative and quantitative side. And we have developed a set of keys and referral review tools around our practice framework so that we can really look at, you know, are we incorporating the voice of the youth and the resource parents and the parents and if so, what does that look like in terms of case outcomes.

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[00:35:49]: So, we have had some tremendous outcomes over the last ten years - we've reduced the number of substantiated allegations of maltreatment by over 30% over the last ten years, we've reduced our numbers of kids coming into foster care by about 35% and reduced the total number of kids who are in out of home care by over 50%. So, we used to have nearly 7,000 children in foster care, we're now down to under 2,000. We've also significantly reduced our reliance on group home or congregate care - so, again, that's been an almost 80% reduction, we had nearly 700 children in group homes and now we're down to about 80.

[00:36:34]: So, that's been a tremendous effort jointly, obviously with our resource families, we couldn't do that without them. We've seen a huge increase in the number of families who are actually part of developing their case plan. So, right now, you know, we track how many families are really involved in that and we're usually close to about 80% of our families are actively involved in developing their own case plan. And then, we monitor how many youth ultimately achieve some form of permanency, whether that's reunification, guardianship or adoption. So, about 82% of our youth do achieve some form of permanency. It takes us about three years to hit that number, so we're working on trying to make that happen a little bit faster, Margo's team has done some great work in that area. But we've been really proud with some of the outcomes we've been able to achieve.

TOM OATES [00:37:27]: Wow, just absolutely impressive. And clearly, over the past, you know, number of minutes we've been taking, it's been impressive in terms of all the various partners, all the tools, all of the training and all of the work that happens in every aspect that you guys are able to incorporate. So, there are gonna be agencies, there are gonna be groups out there, collaboratives out there that want to mimic some of the success that, Kim, you just talked about. Valesha, I'll turn it back to you and say for another agency out there that turns to you and says, alright, I want to do something like this - what are those keys to success, what would you tell them, alright these are the things that you've got to have?

VELISHA BULLOCK [00:38:08]: Well, it's very interesting because, again, Kim stated this before, we're one of the counties that really are looked at in California because we are pretty forward thinking. You know, our leadership is - that's the key, first of all, we need to make sure our leadership believes in what we're doing - and, we have a very supportive leadership, so that allows me and my team to be able to go out and advocate exactly what's working here in San Diego.

[00:38:34]: We have a very good relationship with our southern counties group through our CWDA, which is our Child Welfare Directors Association. In Southern California, we have Riverside, Orange County, San Bernardino, El Centro and L.A. and we really meet on a regular, monthly basis. They say, what's working well in your county, here's what's working well in our county and how we can best team up - because, you know, our borders are pretty close, so what may happen here in San Diego may very well happen in Riverside County. And so, we really want to make sure that we provide a consistent message, whether we know we have different types of leadership, but our message in regarding servicing our families and our kids, it's pretty consistent, and we have the opportunity to be able to verse that when we have our monthly meetings.

[00:39:25]: And then, as a group, we take that up to Sacramento and we talk about what are our challenges in supporting our youth and supporting our foster families and supporting our collaboratives and other agencies are chiming in on that where we also talk about, we meet on a regular basis with our probation team, we meet with our foster family agency teams, we meet with our collaborative teams.

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Like, there is a meeting on a monthly basis that we meet here called Foster Care Services Committee and it is a conglomerate of different agencies that comes to the table and they say, how can we help support anybody that is, you know, providing care for a child in San Diego County. And we mimic that and try to take that to other counties to say, here's what's working well in San Diego, you may want to try this.

TOM OATES [00:40:11]: So when you flip that question on the other side and looking back, you identified some of the things you must have - guys, for all three of you, what would you have done differently if you could've done it all over again?

VELISHA BULLOCK [00:40:23]: I can start that off. I think - you know I've been here quite a long time - I think, you know, for a while we've always tried to be very respectful of, you know, maintaining confidentiality and sometimes I think that word sort of limits our ability to be able to express what really is needed for a family. Not saying that confidentiality isn't important, but I think we can take whatever trends we have found that is happened in our county to be able to make it more generically approached to be able to say here's what is working in a different level.

[00:40:58]: So, if for a good example, if we have five families that are experiencing the same things, it could be in a different situation, but if the same trend is happening, why aren't we bringing that to the table to have a discussion with our partners, probation, whoever shares, because we work very closely with our law enforcement, you know, bring it up to our hotline to be able to say how do we address when a call comes in, what does it look like? I think if we can be more transparent and be able to say, okay, here's what's been happening with our programs, our agencies in the past year, and make those changes versus waiting five, seven years. I think we need to be more proactive and I think now we can try to do that.

[00:41:42]: So, that's the first thing. And, the next thing is communication. Communication is key. Communication, partnerships, relationships - that gets you to the next level, because we may not be doing something here in San Diego, but if I have a relationship with Sacramento County or with L.A. County, that's gonna help me bring what they're doing down here to be able to say how can we, sort of, match that or not or maybe take some of the things that they're doing and incorporate it into ours. So, with all of those trends, like I said, leadership, our partnerships, communication - if we had been a little bit quicker in the past, I think we probably would be way more advanced than we are right now.

TOM OATES [00:42:24]: One of the themes on that, and Margo, I want you to chime in on this, it's funny a word we haven't even used in this entire conversation - relationships, and how important those are. And not just the communication, but when you pick up the phone or when you get that email from somebody you know it has a lot more weight to it.

MARGO FUDGE [00:42:44]: Yeah, so I wanted to just chime in really quickly on something that I think that we do really well but I wish we had done a little bit earlier - we have an amazing, kind of, quality assurance, the way we look at our casework that Kim did touch on earlier with our reviews, but I think you can learn so much from how the work is done at the social worker level, there's so many things to be learned from that. And we have in every region, we have our CQI, our Quality Improvement analysts that that's their job to kind of review our data, review that case work and that gives us, really, an in depth look at how we're doing at the social worker level.

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[00:43:21]: And so, I think that's something we should be really proud of, we started, you know, eight years ago and I think we've really done a great job with it - too bad we didn't do it, you know, 20 years sooner - but it is a really great tool that we have.

TOM OATES [00:43:32]: Folks, I am amazed at the level of detail and the amount of partnerships and everything that has gone into what you have done and the fact that we were able to cover as much as we could in this conversation. Folks, I just want to thank you guys for spending the time with us and sharing all of the way you are improving, like Kim mentioned, those numbers across San Diego County and supporting, you know, the staff and your children and the partners and the relationships and the birth families and the resource families along the way.

[00:44:08]: Margo, Valesha, Kim, thank you guys so much for your time we really appreciate you sharing with us and thank you, once again, for all the work that you're doing and for sharing with us here on the Information Gateway Podcast.

KIM GIARDINA [00:44:21]: Thank you so much.

VELISHA BULLOCK [00:44:22]: Thank you.

[00:44:25]: What I take away from this episode are three things: the trauma-focused approach – understanding families and children where they are and ensuring all staff are qualified in trauma-informed care; the focus on engagement and recruitment of resource families, and the investment being made in their training – including sharing the voices of birth families and older youth in foster care; and the bottom line results Kim talked about near the end.

[00:44:52]: Now this is the second of two episodes of the podcast looking at how communities are using foster care as a path to strengthening families. Check out our episode featuring the work of the Center for Family Life operating in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. They've got a slightly different approach in that it's more concentrated of an area that they're working in and all of their services are under the same organization – so partnering is a bit different. So, go and check that episode out.

[00:45:19]: We'll also ask you to head on over to the Children's Bureau's website, www.acf.hhs.gov/cb, search podcast. Now, on the page for this episode, we'll have links to the National Foster Care Month website, along with Information Gateway resources and web sections surrounding community collaboration, out-of-home care, and the episode featuring the Center for Family Life.

[00:45:42]: We're really glad we could share the work – the entire system of services – supporting foster care families, birth families, and youth going on in San Diego County. My thanks to Margo Fudge, Valesha Bullock and Kim Giardina for their time to speak with us, along with my thanks to you for joining us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates, have a great day!

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:46:09]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.