

Family Involvement: Supporting Kin Caregivers
Webinar Transcript
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Presenters:

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- Vanessa Lindsey, Kinship Specialist, Clark County Department of Family Services

Millicent Williams: Welcome to today's webinar. I am Millicent Williams, senior consultant with the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. And we are very pleased to present our topic today, Family Involvement: Supporting Kin Caregivers. We were overwhelmed with people wanting to sign on so we are glad that those of you who are here were able to and we will give you information at the end of the webinar on how you can access this particular webinar after the presentation. So thank you, I wanted again to just tell you who our presenters are today. We have Tiffany Hesser, Vanessa Lindsey and Tammie Blackwell, all of whom are staff with the Department of Family Services in Clark County, Nevada. You will learn much more about these dynamic presenters during their individual presentation. This webinar is sponsored and hosted by the National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care with the financial support from the Federal Children's Bureau. We are very excited about this presentation and what we plan to do is to offer you the opportunity to ask questions of our presenters. So we will inform you and instruct you as to how to do this at the appropriate time but just to let you know you will have two opportunities to ask questions so please take notes and we will be happy to answer anything.

Okay we are going to look at our learning objectives...

Tiffany Hesser: Hi Millicent, not to interrupt, this is Tiffany. Can I go back and just introduce each of us?

Millicent Williams: Sure, be my guest.

Tiffany Hesser: My name is Tiffany Hesser. I am the former project director. I am no longer with the Clark County Department of Family Services, but I did oversee the development of the program that we are going to be speaking about.

Vanessa Lindsey: Hi, my name is Vanessa Lindsey and I am a Kinship Specialist with the Department of Family Services and I am a former relative foster parent.

Tammie Blackwell: And I'm Tammie Blackwell with the Clark County Department of Family Services, Kinship Liaison. I'm also a former Kin Caregiver myself.

Millicent Williams: Okay, thank you presenters. Again, you can see our learning objectives, which are here. Kin Caregivers can provide a very important and valuable role within the child welfare system and today we will focus on the Kinship Liaison Program, which is in Clark County, Nevada. This program is an excellent example of what true parent-agency partnerships will look like, and can look like. As you see from the following learning objectives, we will hear about the actual hiring of Kinship Liaisons within the child welfare agency, you will gain an understanding of how this came about, the duties of the liaisons, and also information on the success and challenges of this program. Sprinkled throughout the presentation, as you can see at the bottom of this slide, you will see quotes from caregivers and agency staff about the program. Also, to gain a better understanding of how peer-to-peer support programs can really impact and have very positive outcomes for children in child welfare will be discussed.

We have the nine System of Care infrastructure components which I'm sure most of you are very familiar with. And again at the end of our presentation today we have a resource section, which we will go on into a little more detail about how you can access information on these infrastructure components.

We also have a slide here regarding the System of Care principles, which again is very detailed on the slide. Clark County, their program, their grant was really built upon these System of Care principles and the agency infrastructure was aligned with these principles in mind. So what I'd like to do now is turn it over to our presenters, and have you hear about this wonderful program. Tiffany?

Tiffany Hesser: Hi, this is Tiffany. I think I'll start with what folks usually ask us about when they want to know how we develop this kind of program within the Clark County Department of Family Services. We were very fortunate in late 2003 to receive a federal grant through the Children's Bureau that was an "Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care" grant. It was an infrastructure improvement grant that was designed to be a demonstration project, so we'll acknowledge setting out that we did have a fair amount of resources and support at the federal level to kind of design and develop the program. So I hope that as we discuss some of the things we did you'll find that hopefully we have worked out some of the kinks and this can be replicated in other areas that might not be fortunate enough to have that kind of support at this time. Our goal with our project was the Clark County Department of Family Services wanted to use the Systems of Care approach to improving the safety, permanency and well-being of children living with kin caregivers. I'll talk a little bit more in a few minutes about how we chose that population. You'll see what our project goals and objectives are; they are up on the screen. We focused with our project development on relative caregivers and children in their care. I think there was a recognition at that time that placing a large number of children that were in our custody with relatives and yet we were seeing not the best outcomes. We had a lot of turnover in placements and just in general we were hearing that we probably weren't doing enough to

support these relatives that we were placing children with and as I've spoken with folks around the country I think this may be similar to what some of you are facing in your community.

So we wanted to set out with the objective of increasing the placements of children with kin. As we all know, research shows that these are more stable and more supportive placements for children, keeping in mind that we wanted to increase the safety of those children who are living with kin, focusing on physical and mental health, the stability of the placements as I just mentioned, permanency concerns, and I think the large focus on our program as we get more into talking about kinship liaisons was increasing the capacity of relatives to care for the children living with them, rather than, "here's the kid, enjoy." And of course all of this was done under the infrastructure of the Systems of Care principles, which you are familiar with and we've previously shared.

When we've looked at how we should build our support, we partnered with the [inaudible] here in Nevada, here in Las Vegas and there was an extensive needs assessment done throughout the state, with a large portion of the population and therefore responses being here in Clark County, which is [inaudible] if you are not familiar, and it was interesting because I think we had a lot of ideas about what we thought kin caregivers would need or say they need, and yet when the surveys came back I think we were a little surprised to find that it wasn't, I think you know money, support, things like that we expected, but you know one of the highest needs that they mentioned was a need to network, a desire to network with other caregivers, and that was very striking to us. They wanted mentors, they expressed that they had a need to understand how to negotiate the system, the legal issues, permanency issues, keeping in mind that this is grandma or auntie, or somebody who has already had a relationship with the child quite likely, in most cases, but they haven't had a relationship with the child welfare system, the court system, the case workers and all of that, so just having someone kind of help them navigate the system, we heard a lot about that.

Of course knowing what some of these children have been through there were requests for more information around dealing with the children's behavior, dealing with loss and grief, both the child in their care, their grief and loss, but also as a caregiver and a relative, there is the multiple layers of grief and loss going on. These are family members of theirs that the children have been removed from and you know, as we all know those circumstances can be pretty excruciating on families and there is often loss of relationships, stress, all of those issues within the family. They also talked about what we expected to find, that they needed some monthly subsidies. In Clark County we were not licensing relative caregivers at a very high rate, so most of these were unpaid placements. Back when we started this in 2003-2004, there were a lot of concerns about medical insurance for the children in their care. Asking for help about facilitating the visits between the children and their parents, once again going back to, 'these are family members.' These aren't people outside of their lives that they are caring for their children. Unlike a traditional foster care placement, these relatives have to negotiate all these family dynamics and have to act as our gatekeepers and representatives of the agency in either not allowing visits in some cases or supervising visits and dealing with that. And it's very challenging for a lot of our relative caregivers, how they negotiate that agency sponsored role versus their role within their family, and knowing that there is impact on both you're either jeopardizing a child's placement potentially, if you don't follow the rules that have been set by the agency, but you are also

jeopardizing your relationship with your family members if you aren't able to negotiate that. So help on those issues. Educational services, school supplies, health care concern.

Also had a request for recreational opportunities for the children. I don't know that that is something that would have stuck us initially, you know when people were representing their needs, but you know, if you haven't had a child in care or if you're grandma you are maybe not as familiar with after school programs or summer sport programs or things like that, these kids have been through a lot, they have a lot of energy, especially if there is generational differences that are sometimes challenging for maybe a grandparent or great-grandparent to deal with, so looking at recreational opportunity. A focus again on some emergency funds, and just a general need for information and referral. How do they find what they need when they are negotiating our system?

I have included this slide here of the Clark County Systems of Care. This just demonstrates how we structured our whole development of this program, how we function within Clark County, so I put at the center the Department of Family Services, the families were working with caregivers and the children in their care, you'll see that supported, surrounded by services and supports, both our partners and providers within the system. Our activities that we focused on, all of that of course encompassed within the System of Care principles.

All of this, between the needs assessment recognizing what the needs were, the receipt of this federal grant, and knowing that we wanted to focus on this population, led to us developing our kinship liaison program. So in May of 2007, four kinship liaisons were hired. And I'm not going to torture you all by looking at our faces much longer; I'm going to skip to the next slide. But that shows some of us who are going to be speaking today.

Kinship liaisons are all current or former relative caregivers for children in the custody of DFS, the Department of Family Services, and this was really important. We thought long and hard about this, how do we provide the best support to caregivers, and based on their feedback and our needs assessment, the number one thing being talked about was the desire to network with other caregivers and asking for family advocates and mentors and who better to mentor folks than someone who has been through this, someone who is experienced it! And not to say that a caseworker can't tell them what to expect to happen, it's not the same as someone who has been through it. So that, from the outset we decided that this needed to be a peer driven program.

Initially we had partnered with a non-profit agency in our community to provide these services. There were some challenges in that and we can talk a little bit more about that if anyone has any questions. We looked at developing a volunteer network and found that the volunteer network was not sufficient in and of itself. We actually needed pay staff to make this function and work and be able to really have all the merit that it should be afforded. So initially we hired the kin liaisons, the caring communities, that was our System of Care grant, and three of those four positions that we've hired have been sustained in their supports, their support position as well within the program currently. So that was a big coup, while we developed this with the support of some grant dollars, I think it's important to stress that even in these tough economic times, these positions, and you'll see how that happened within our agency, have been valued and supported to the degree that they are still sustained. They are full time positions, they are

employees of Clark County, and they receive all of the benefits and such that other county employees receive. I get a lot of questions on how we hire para-professionals within any agency, and we can provide that information if folks have more questions about that, they are hired under a employee role that we call family support workers and it did not require a degree, it matched a lot of the types of supportive services that we were going to have, that kinship liaisons do, and so that worked well for how we recruited these folks into the agency. I'm going to turn it over to Vanessa and Tammie who can talk a little bit about what they do with families, how they work with relative caregivers.

Vanessa Lindsey: The contact that we initiate with the family comes from different sources. We have a system now which is the placement report log that comes out every day and when a relative placement is made we are all notified and we receive a referral with the information on what kids are placed, who the caregiver is, and if there is other information that we should know before we contact the family, a lot of that is included. And upon the placement there is an initial introductory letter that is sent. We mail them out a care-giving guide and a resource guide that has information in it, it answers a lot of questions, because for a lot of people this is something that they've never had to deal with, so they want to know do they have to attend court, do the kids have to stay at the school that they are at, just a lot of different things so we try to make contact with them as soon as possible.

Tiffany Hesser: And I just want to say, sorry to interrupt Vanessa, the care-giving guide and the resource guide, we developed those while we were developing the program with the grant and we found that it was important to have the information memorialized in a sort of guide that we could provide caregivers because at initial placement they often don't even know the questions to ask, they don't know what they are going to need to know and it comes up down the road, and while the kinship liaisons are all very accessible to the relatives that they work with, the reality is sometimes a weekend or late at night that someone has these questions, a "oh my god I have a court date on Monday, what do I do," so we really did need to develop, and these are customized guides for relative caregivers. It speaks to this specific experience and what they may or are likely to encounter.

Tammie Blackwell: And I also wanted to add that sometimes we are linked with a caregiver prior to them taking placement of the children to try to get them licensed so they can have the financial assistance prior to the children entering the home.

Vanessa Lindsey: We also give them ongoing support even after they're licensed, they may need help with enrolling the kids in school, finding child care, accessing WIC, and right now we have a pretty good partnership with the Urban League, and what that does is while they are in the process of getting licensed, they are not charged for assistance for child care but they do have a time frame on them getting licensed, and once they get licensed, the child care services is good for up to two years, so that is a huge help because if you are not expecting to take in any children, you need to figure out how you are going to continue your life and get to work and everything that you need to do, so that really helps the relative a lot because without child care, sometimes the placement itself is not able to be sustained.

Tammie Blackwell: And even after they are licensed they are still able to contact us for support as needed. If they need additional support past us then we can link them up with the Office of Parent Liaisons, which we will talk about later on in the presentation.

Vanessa Lindsey: And also with our supportive services, the initial packet, as I was saying, is mailed out with the care-giving guide, the resource guide, and a Clark County pamphlet explaining everything that they may need to know right away because once the placement takes place, a lot of times we may not be able to make initial contact with the family until maybe a week later because it's a lot to adjust to, they are trying to get prepared, just a lot of things going on, so when we do get a hold of them, we explain to them their options, we even assist them with filling out the application, helping them get their home ready for their [child], home inspection, we even have a little funding set up now for the relatives who cannot afford fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, first aid kits, things like that that would hinder them from getting licensed, we pretty much have that accessible for them.

Tammie Blackwell: As well as beds. When we go out and meet with the families we kind of assess their needs to see what it is they need that would hinder them from being licensed and while they are in the process of obtaining licensure, we also work on anything that would hinder them from becoming licensed at that time as well.

Vanessa Lindsey: We also sit in on child and family team meetings, we encourage the caregivers to advocate, get as much information as they can and be a team player with the department, we encourage them to do shared parenting, just all the things that surround and wrap their child so that either reunification can occur or adoption can occur or the children can go home.

Tiffany Hesser: And another thing that they haven't highlighted is their involvement with training, not just with caregivers but also for Family Services staff. For new employees coming in as part of the core training that they go through includes a piece on kinship, and I would say a fair number of community trainings and outreach, a lot of partner agencies, the University, we have a lot of people that call on us to find out what exactly we are doing and how they partner with us.

Vanessa Lindsey: For me personally, I think the advantage of the peer perspective gives that relative that is experiencing this for the first time a little bit clearer understanding that they are not the only person that is going through this, and while they are going through this, they will be supported, the kids will be supported, the whole family dynamic is still going to be supported, so with my role, because of my past care-giving experience, I really try to make sure that I am there for my caregiver, I try to explain things they should know so that they are not surprised or something unexpectedly is told to them. And for me, when I was going through the relative foster licensing process, it was totally different. I was mixed in with people that were trying to foster, so my experience in the training itself, going through the licensing process itself, it was totally different because I felt like my needs weren't being met, the concerns that I had weren't being addressed, so where we specialize our trainings to just be geared towards relatives when they get into this classroom, they get the feeling, the sense that they are not the only one going through this, there are other people in there, they network, they make connections, and they have

I think a clearer understanding that this is not something bad, and in the end they will gain a lot of knowledge and I even think it improves their family dynamic.

Tiffany Hesser: And I think that that's really important point, particularly around the training piece. Watching relative caregivers sit in a licensing training with folks who don't have children in their care yet, versus what they are experiencing, "here we gave you these kids at 3 am last week," that was huge. The difference of them feeling isolated sitting in a training feeling like "wow, I'm not like any of these other people who are excited about getting kids or preparing their homes for kids" and all of the things that we do while we are licensing folks to get them ready for this, whereas relative caregivers quite frequently already have the children in their home, did not have the advantage of all sorts of time to prepare for this, either physically preparing their home, financially preparing their home, and most certainly emotionally preparing for the behavioral and just emotional impact on their family so I think that's a huge part of how having specialized trainings and classes with peer involvement was just, such a huge impact, I can't tell you how many things, how many comments I received on that. And it's interesting for me as a program director to have gotten to experience the impact that this provided while I was working towards developing this program and I think I'm a great social worker and all of that and I think folks in general were comfortable and pleased with working with me, it was nothing compared to having folks who had been there and done this and lived this experience to interact with these relatives that we just place children with. The value that is placed on them, the unspoken recognition of that value, look, we have hired folks just like you, we are paying them to work within our agency to help you out through this process because we recognize how valuable you are and how valuable they are. It was just amazing to get to experience that.

Tammie Blackwell: Also it makes it a little easier for the caregivers to trust us when they realize that we have gone through those same frustrations and we actually realize what it is that they are going through, so it makes it a little easier to trust us and they open up a little bit more to us and then they feel a little more comfortable going ahead through the process of talking to us about any hardships they are experiencing through this process.

Vanessa Lindsey: And also with the peer to peer support, providing emotional support, you know a lot of people may look at that and maybe question, do we cross the line, are we blurred between our job and the roles that we do. For me, personally, emotional support is being there for that caregiver, when that caregiver may be at the end of their rope because the parents are being rude, being nasty, or maybe they are feeling like their phone calls are not being returned or they are having a hard time accessing a crib or clothing for the kids, I try to be right there for what they need because something as small as that can determine if the placement is going to be disrupted, or if we can sustain the placement. So sometimes it may even just be a phone call to give them words of encouragement that you know, "right now at the beginning it's a little rough, things are up in the air, shaky", it's going from a CPS worker to a permanent worker, they may be coming to the caregiver asking them to adopt because of the circumstances, and I just try to really explain to them to be open. Write questions down, ask questions, just try to absorb as much as you can and don't make hasty decisions, just take your time and we will be there to walk through you with the whole process.

Tammie Blackwell: Not only that, but the caseworkers there to assist the parent and the children, there is no one for the caregiver, so we stepped in to be the support for the caregiver, so they know that they are not in this by themselves, that if they need any type of support they can come to us, and we are just there for them to talk to if they need any assistance with anything, that there is someone there for the caregiver, not just the children and the parent.

Vanessa Lindsey: And for me empowering families by educating them on permanency, when we first came over to the Department of Family Services, I had a family that I was working with and I helped get them licensed, and maybe about 6 months ago I saw an email and they actually adopted the child that was in their care. So every time when I see an email from my relative caregivers that went as far as to adopt kids, for me that just makes my day. Nobody has to come to me and say “thank you Vanessa for the job that you do.” For me it’s those unhidden, unseen kudos that I get, so I just do it because I was a caregiver at one point and I know exactly how they feel, what they are going through and I just want to make it just a little bit easier for them.

Tiffany Hesser: And I have to say we have had, we have really been blessed and been very fortunate to have had the peer involvement from the outset of this program. When we were partnering with the non-profit, initially you will notice we didn’t hire the kin liaisons into the Department until 2007 when the project began in 2004. There have been a lot of unsung heroes along the way, from the beginning we have had very strong relative caregiver involvement in the development of all this, and I can’t stress enough how essential that is. It’s not just important, it’s essential. You cannot do this authentically without having the active involvement, engagement, input and respect for folks who have lived this.

We have some caregiver quotes that we are going to leave up and some caseworker quotes, but I believe Millicent was going to field some questions.

Millicent Williams: Hi, yes, what we’d like to do now is, since we’ve done half of our presentation, we have a lot more, but we wanted to give you the opportunity to ask questions at this juncture. If you have a question would you please press *6 and that will un-mute your line so that you can ask your question. After you have asked your question, please press *6 again to return to the mute. Do we have any questions?

Question 1: I would like to ask if kinship providers are required to get licensed in your County?

Vanessa Lindsey: They are not required to be licensed but we do inform them that...I’m sorry there is an echo.

Millicent Williams: Perhaps someone is still un-muted. Vanessa was saying that it was not required to be licensed.

Vanessa Lindsey: It is not mandatory. Licensing is not mandatory, but it is a way for us to provide financial assistance to the family. And also if they are going to proceed to receive child care assistance, it’s only good for 6 months, enough time to allow them to become licensed, where it doesn’t go by their income. After the 6 months if they have not obtained licensure, then

child care will start to go off their income, and some people at that point won't be eligible for child care assistance.

Tiffany Hesser: So it's strongly encouraged but no, it's not an absolute requirement that relatives get licensed.

Vanessa Lindsey: And all relatives that we work with do not get licensed. Some decide to pursue guardianship or some just decide to stay as an unpaid relative placement.

Millicent Williams: Great, thank you. Any other questions for our presenters? *6 to un-mute your phone to ask a question.

Question 2: This is Jackie from Tallahassee, Florida. We just wanted to see if we could copy or get the handout, the slides.

Millicent Williams: All of the information, the handouts, the audio, will all be available, and at the end of the presentation you will have a website where you can access the entire webinar that we are doing today. Okay, I think we have two people asking a question. Can we have one person ask a question and then the other can ask.

Question 3: How do you ensure that these people are eligible for licensure in terms of foster care and regulation?

Tiffany Hesser: When placement has occurred, there is a background check...can I just...I think someone is un-muted again?

Millicent Williams: Once you ask a question, please put your phone to *6 to return to mute, and for those of you who may be waiting to ask a question, just have your finger near *6. Sorry Tiffany.

Vanessa Lindsey: What happens is when a relative takes placement, there is an initial set of fingerprints done, and they are cleared through the background department, and once they are cleared if that relative is able to make placement, then the children will be released and the information will be put on the placement [inaudible] and when they are going through the licensing process they are required to take a second set of fingerprints and we also ask them upfront to disclose any criminal history, anything that may come up on their background, their fingerprint check.

Tiffany Hesser: So they go through the full licensing application and process and screening at the point of licensure and prior to placement there is of course the emergency, we do 24 hour fingerprinting and their home is inspected prior to placement. But I think your question was around the licensure piece and they do go through the whole process that any other foster parent would go through. The difference is the children are often placed with them during that process, so they are receiving the extra support through kinship liaison in getting through that process.

Millicent Williams: Okay, any other questions? *6 to unmute.

Question 4: Hello, my name is Rashida Harris. It's in regards to school enrollment. How has your program assisted caregivers in making a swift enrollment for the children?

Tammie Blackwell: Well, with our children it depends on where they are in the school year. The kids can actually remain in the school that they are currently registered at, or the caregiver and the parent they can change schools, so it depends pretty much on the caregiver and the parent and our transportation system will accommodate the children in getting them back to their home school if they chose to stay at that school.

Question 4: Thank you.

Millicent Williams: We will take one more question if there is one, and you will also have an opportunity at the end of the presentation for more questions. But is there anymore right now?
*6.

Question 5: Yes, this is Fredricka Livingston with the Children's Center in Houston, Texas. I have a question. I really did appreciate your phrasing of the needs of the families and that was negotiating the family dynamics, negotiating the agency policies and the family roles. What did you guys find to be successful in helping families to kind of work through that process? And I also had another question to ask, I just wanted to know, unless you are going to cover it later, what kind of [inaudible] did you think to be, what were the largest challenges that you see as far as working with the families while they were being verified?

Millicent Williams: Okay, we can go back to *6 and our presenters can answer. Thank you.

Tiffany Hesser: I'll address the first part of your question because I think that it was an eye-opener for us as agency administrators and such to realize that our markers for success, looking at placement stability and permanency outcomes, that while we may have felt like we were doing a great job, oh that led to a guardianship or that led to a case being closed or something, that that wasn't necessarily in line with relatives who were experiencing this and had become the caregivers. Their version of success often doesn't parallel what our markers of success are, so I think the liaisons will have to talk more about that perspective.

Vanessa Lindsey: Well some of the challenges were to help them understand that with our role and with the department role we are all encouraging care parenting, and we are all there for a common goal and that's to either have the children go back home to their parents or find them somewhere where they can call home or be adopted or whatever the situation was at that time, so for us what we do, we always encourage the caregivers to attend CFT meetings...

Millicent Williams: You want to just say what that is?

Vanessa Lindsey: A CFT meeting is a child and family team meeting where everyone that is involved with the case, with the children, comes together and sits down and talks and discusses what the strengths are, what the weaknesses are, just as a whole to see what can be done to get the children back home a little bit faster. We also encourage the caregivers to be open to share

parenting. A lot of them, for whatever reason, chose to use the visitation center, but if at all possible we try to encourage them to have visits maybe at the park or McDonalds, things like that so it's not in such a structured environment and just try to support the parent if at all possible, if they are on track, doing everything that they need to do because ultimately at the end we want the children to go home. But at the same sense we also educate them on the permanency options, we explain to them that adoption isn't a bad thing within the family, that sometimes that may be the best thing to keep the kids in the family so it's a couple of different ways that we encourage caregivers to not let some of the challenges that they feel are being placed upon them and to try to partner with the department to make this whole case plan a smoother transition.

Tiffany Hesser: But I think that that's important to not understate, that once again, these ideas of reunification and shared parenting and all of that, those tend to be more department goals, and it absolutely does occur, there is no denying that it does occur that we have relatives who that is not their personal goal. They don't necessarily believe mom or dad or cousin or whatever the family member, they've been living whole lives perhaps with these folks, and they may be at a different point of tolerance or lack of tolerance with their family members than what our goals are. And I think that where, once again that's really challenging, it's exceptionally challenging for a caseworker to negotiate some of those family dynamics, I think that I've seen that that's where having these peer positions to kind of talk about it and talk about what potential successes could be both within the family as well as from an agency or system perspective, it's not easy. I credit these ladies with being able to deal with some of these really tough situations. And sometimes, I think often, the caregivers are able to hear some of it better from someone who has lived this. It doesn't feel so maybe crammed down their throat or maybe as unrealistic if people who can say, "listen I remember what it felt like, I remember how ticked off I was at my sister, and when they told me she was getting her kids back, I wasn't particularly happy." So I think that it helped having someone within our agency and their experience with our agency that can talk about the realities of how difficult this is and how we need them to agree and be on board with our stated goals, we certainly can't have folks who are sabotaging the case plan. But this is an extra set of eyes and hands and ears and support and quite frankly shoulders to lean on to help them get through this process so that type of thing doesn't occur.

Tammie Blackwell: And I'd just like to add that one of the things that helped us out really was communication in our approach. We approach each caregiver different. We didn't approach every caregiver with the same notion. And then communication. We didn't just assume that they need, we asked them what they need. We asked them what they needed or how we could assist them. So I think that's what really helped us be successful, if we never assumed anything. We just asked them how can we help them and what they needed.

Tiffany Hesser: And we will be talking more about challenges through the second half of our presentation, but I hope that answered your question about the differences between what we consider success and what families may consider success. Are we going to move on, was that it with questions Millicent?

Millicent Williams: Hi, yes, I'm sorry. We can continue and if all participants will return to *6 to mute your lines again.

Question 6: I had a question.

Tiffany Hesser: Okay.

Millicent Williams: Okay, one more.

Question 6: Sorry, I was wondering, I'm not sure if you mentioned it, but what is your service area? Who receives your services?

Tiffany Hesser: From an agency perspective or with this program?

Millicent Williams: With the program.

Question 6: With this program.

Tiffany Hesser: We link kinship liaisons with all relatives who have a child placed with them.

Question 6: Even on the reservation?

Vanessa Lindsey: Well, I've had one case that was a Native American case, and I still assisted them with everything they needed as far as if they needed to access clothes for the children or child care or whatever it was they needed but they chose not to get licensed so, that was to the extent of the services that I provided for that family.

Tiffany Hesser: So they are definitely not excluded, but I would acknowledge that, number one we haven't had a large number of those cases in our jurisdiction, but I think that that is a unique and specialized population with their family culture and dynamic and we found that they are often receiving that kind of support on the reservation because there is that more familial approach, so they are certainly not excluded and absolutely they are provided all of the same support and services, I don't know that it's as received as maybe some of our other relative placements. Because keeping in mind, this is voluntary interactions that our relative caregivers have with their kinship liaison, some of them lean very heavily on the support provided by a kinship liaison, and other families have their own strengths within their family or within their own churches or neighborhoods or communities and so they maybe don't need as much support, so I hope that answers your question.

Millicent Williams: Okay, thank you, let's continue with the presentation.

Tiffany Hesser: And I think Millicent did mention that there will be opportunities for questions at the end of this as well, so anyone that didn't get a chance to ask we will be sticking around.

[47:48]

Tiffany Hesser: So we talked a little bit about the kinship liaisons and what they do and bringing them into the agency, and as many of you have hit on or are probably wondering, there were a lot of challenges and a lot of obstacles to overcome. We had to put a great deal of effort into our collaborative efforts, which is consistent with the Systems of Care approach and I truly

believe that the only way you can do this. So while the liaisons focused on working directly with the caregivers, we also, as I mentioned previously, worked towards educating staff about the unique experience of kinship care-giving, and stakeholders out in the community, that would be all of our Systems of Care partners and agency partners, they do a great deal of advocacy in the community for kinship needs and I'm going to take the opportunity to toot their horn with this, because some of the things they've mentioned to you, like some of the child care assistance, assistance in getting beds, fire extinguishers, I could just run down a huge list of things that I'm telling you did not exist before these ladies were working in this capacity and before this program was built. And I'm talking about the types of things that aren't formally part of the agency. The support and awareness and acknowledgment of this in the community is mind boggling, how much they have attained through their efforts and their work out in the community and people going, "wow, we didn't realize that while a relative had a child in their care that prior to getting licensed they didn't have any financial assistance for child support. They have to be licensed before they qualify for the child support, and oh my god how is there this gap, how can we help you fill this need?" Just numerous things like that. They have worked so many relationships and collaborated with so many different providers and I mean everything from annual holiday events that these children are very blessed to have these wonderful drives, to just the everyday, like I said, needing a fire escape ladder or extinguisher or something like that in order to get licensed. So these were the kinds of challenges that actually were disrupting placements prior to their involvement. It sounds so crazy that something like that could turn into a child having to move out of a home, but those things were happening prior to their involvement. And I just can't put enough stress on how them being out in the community has just had such an impact in Clark County.

And then of course partnering with agency staff and I will be the first to acknowledge that when we first hired kinship liaisons as full time employees at the agency there were a lot of eyebrows raised, a fair amount of skepticism on some folks part, saying, wait a minute, these are, actually in all three of these cases, the four kinship liaisons we started with, they had all currently in that time or formerly been a part of the cases of our caseworkers, they were caregivers for children in our custody and so there was a lot of, "wait a minute, who are they coming into our agency and what is their role and what will they have access to and how is that going to work and how does that affect me as a caseworker or a licensing worker" and we will talk about that a couple of slides ahead from here about the culture shift that I think occurred, but really just [focused] on the culture of agencies around town as well as within our own agency.

And part of how we accomplished that was really just integrating them into the fabric of our agency and all the services that are provided. Rather than this being a separate, off to the side thing that you may or may not use as a resource, like I said they were linked with all relatives upon placement of a child. They are included in the foster licensing process, they worked closely... we have a specialized licensing unit for relatives which is huge because they are not just added to the staff of folks waiting to get licensed, we have expedited process recognizing that the children are already in these homes and we need to make sure that we expedite the process and so we have a specialized unit for relative licensing. Retention and support unit, we have a program of foster parent liaisons that provide caregiver support. They work closely with a foster parent association here locally, our placement team is in the agency and just really being present at caregiver events and activities and such. Do you ladies have anything?

Vanessa Lindsey: I think right now, in this time of our kinship liaison, it's not a program anymore we are actually a unit. Where it would take relatives anywhere from six to eight months to get licensed, sometimes we are turning them around as quick as 30 days, 45 days and you know just for me, because from personal experience, it took me six months to complete the licensure process so to make that initial contact as soon as placement occurs, assist the caregiver with the application, collecting documents, getting them signed up for training, fingerprinting, all of that can occur within 30 days if everything is in order and ready to go. 30 days can make or break a placement, because if you don't have that support and not necessarily just financial support, just the support of someone kind of explaining and guiding the things that you need to do or what's required of you to do while you are partnering with the agency is just unbelievable.

Tiffany Hesser: Or how to not give up and keep your faith.

You know essential to that is acknowledging I think that there was a big culture shift within the Department, embracing both the kinship liaison as para-professional peer workers, providing these services to families and I think just an appreciation of the kinship experience as a whole for our caregivers and the children in their care, and once again this is not without some bumps and bruises along the way. It was very challenging to achieve this and I would say, along with the challenges of getting agency staff to initially accept this, we then have had some things along the way where it's almost been too well received, and "oh my god how great, can I have a kinship liaison work with this family and this family and that family," and so some of the growing pains were also making sure that this is where I had to be very diligent as a program director over this, making sure that whatever the kinship liaison were doing was focused on the caregiver needs, not necessarily the caseworkers needs or licensing workers needs, because we had some shifts, where, "oh let's make them caseworker aids or have them be licensing assistants" and their role includes that, they absolutely are of assistance to case workers and licensing workers, but the goal and focus is that they are supporting caregivers through this process, not taking on the duties or roles of other agency workers. And so it's a balance, it's a balance while they certainly are helping with case planning and child and family teams and licensing processes and all of that, that is not their job. Their support is in that role through that process and it's hugely valuable.

Part of how we achieved the sustainability was just by having it very integrated into all of these different agency activities and services and as I mentioned before, the county now does support and fund these positions.

Vanessa Lindsey: I'd just like to add that early on when we made our transition over into the Department, like Tiffany said it was a lot of eyebrows being raised and they were unsure of what our roles were, and every opportunity that we got to go to any unit meetings, site meetings, just whatever to put ourselves out there and to explain what our role was and what we were there to do, I think that really enhanced our program so that we are just all over. Anytime a placement is going to occur that has questions or if a placement is going to disrupt, just whatever it is, we are called upon to assist that relative caregiver.

Tiffany Hesser: I recognized from an administrative standpoint, that there was a big shift of the perception going from, "this is someone who might step on our toes or make things more

difficult or quite frankly in some people's opinion, screw up this case," to where now they are recognized as the support and a resource for families in this situation.

We had a lot of challenges along the way. And any of you implementing similar programs, I mean I'm sure experience a lot of these challenges. We put together the slide on some of our lessons learned. Realistic timeline was just huge for us. We had the benefit of a five year federal grant to try and develop this program. I will tell you it's an ever changing, ever growing program well beyond the life of the grant which we are no longer receiving any fiscal support through that grant, but I think that it was tough for us and perhaps some of our federal partners, although I won't speak on their behalf to understand five years was just skimming the surface of developing this stuff. We could have easily got another five years out with the benefit of some federal support. Building relationships, earning trust and having this meaningful engagement with caregivers, with peer staff, with agency and community partners, it really is...it takes a lot of time. And work within a Systems of Care and all of that partnership and everything does take time and especially for it to be meaningful, to not just have it feel like this is the next new thing coming along and it may be here next year or not. And that was hugely important to us that this doesn't turn into a flash in the pan, that this does not only exist while the grant was currently running. We wanted to make sure that this was going to go on and so just being very realistic. If you all are implementing any program like this and it feels like it's taking a long time, it should and it will.

The volunteer kinship mentor program, we initially set this up with the idea that it would be predominately run with volunteers and just have maybe a little oversight on the side, and that just didn't work. I think that it was a huge turning point when we recognized that if this is that important and all the things that we are saying need to be done to support our caregivers, then we need to step up to the plate, and that includes valuing these peer workers, these peer positions enough to provide them a decent salary and benefits and all of the stuff that our other staff has, so that was the big shift for us, to understand that we were a little flawed in our thinking that this could just be all volunteer, and that's not to say that we don't rely on volunteers for a lot, and a lot of the other supportive support groups and you know foster parent activities and things like that that go on, volunteers are huge and absolutely grab them up if you can, but we discovered fairly early on that that wasn't going to sustain this program.

A huge need for flexibility. I would say that we have an expectation from an agency standard that people adapt to us and our experience, and I learned early on that we had a lot of adaptation to do and needing to be really, truly open to new ideas and seeing things from other folk's perspectives.

Remembering the bigger picture. Sometimes when this would really feel overwhelming I think to me as well as the kinship liaisons we sometimes would have to lock ourselves in a room and just remind ourselves that as exhausted as we were and as emotionally draining as this work was, that there is a bigger picture. We are doing this, like Vanessa was expressing earlier, you are not always going to get the thank you's and the recognition, so sometimes it's just knowing that down the line or at this point being down the line and getting to see those successes is huge.

Challenges with data limitations. We had some evaluation requirements with our federal grant of course, and had a lot of challenges with implementing new programming and with some of our state reporting systems and who had access to those at the county and all of that. So we grew a lot with our data collection, I'll tell you it was a real challenge at the beginning and it made it difficult to show some of our outcomes. I also think that this type of supportive work is very difficult to quantify. It becomes those stories of quotes, of what we see and hear to know that this is truly being successful. And the [inaudible] on the part of all of our staff and agency was really huge. And the bit about child welfare understanding. That goes back to some of our challenges with our systems partners who maybe are not traditionally working within the child welfare system and just understanding that in comparison...we had had a Systems of Care grant and project in our area in Clark County prior to this child welfare outcomes one and so it was difficult for some people to understand that there are some differences. While we are all in the same system and these are all our kids and we should still be working under the same principles, it is undeniable that in the child welfare system there is a power differential and there are involuntary participants in our system and so that was a lot to kind of work around and keep people cognizant of.

We have some statistics. While I spoke about how limiting they are and I don't really think these truly speak to the heart of the program of how folks feel supported and appreciated, we certainly did meet some of our project goals: increasing placements and supporting them and this slide shows how our relative licensing rates were impacted throughout the life of the project, so you can see that our numbers in 2010, 358 relative homes were licensed, so that's a lot of homes, you know, and every one of these homes were involved with the kinship liaison at some point with varying levels of support and involvement. Remember there are three, four positions, actually doing this, so that really speaks about the fact that what we are doing is wonderful, it's a lot of work for a few people to be doing.

This next slide about adoption is a wonderful permanency outcome, is just huge. You will see the number of adoptions and how that increased and I think that that speaks volumes about how successful and having this additional support, getting children to this point of having a permanent home.

Vanessa Lindsey: And I really want to add onto this, when this kind of initially started, relatives really did not want to adopt because they weren't informed enough about what all that entailed, the support wasn't there for them early on when they initially received the child, and I think with the kinship liaison being there now to assist them throughout the whole process, I think they are more knowledgeable, they have a better sense of understanding and they really get it now that it's not about the parents, it's not about the caregiver, it's about the children that are being placed with them. And when we explain to them the permanency options, when they go to trainings, when they have their CFT meetings, they have a better understanding, a sense of calmness, a sense of wanting to complete the task, however that task may end, if it's the children going home, if they adopt, if the children decide to do independent living if they are teenagers, so they just have a better sense of understanding.

Tammie Blackwell: I wanted to add that in the beginning, we had some adoption materials that we are able to provide for the caregivers in the initial visits also, and we have an adoption unit

also and we have resources that they are able to utilize, so they can just be more informed if they do go through the adoption process.

Tiffany Hesser: And I think with the issue of adoption, as with many of our interactions with relative caregivers, this was another one of those key areas where our agency's ideas of success maybe didn't parallel with the relative's ideas of success, and adoption can be a real hot button issue for a lot of relatives. They want to help out their families, they want to even raise these children and say they are willing to do this permanently but then you start talking adoption and that means a whole different thing, and "wait I don't want to be mom I still want to be grandma, I still want to be..." so I think having some extra support in discussing some of these things and talking about what that can mean for your family versus what maybe the rest of the world thinks of some of these terms was hugely important.

So we have a little less than 20 minutes left and we wanted to open it up to some questions. As we field some of these questions, we will flip through some slides. Keep in mind that you will be able to access this information as well from the internet, but I wanted to share some follow up contact information.

Millicent Williams: We will like to take some more questions now, so please remember to go to *6 to un-mute your lines to ask your question.

Question 7: Yes, I'm calling from Grant County in New Mexico, Silver City, and I wondered from the way I heard you speak about this, it sounded as if your county didn't have a placement worker or is it that the placement worker wasn't doing the same kind type of thing that the kinship worker does.

Tiffany Hesser: We do have an entire placement team and there are placement workers. I think that this goes back to how I described that these roles are there along the entire process, from placement through licensure all the way up through adoption. Sometimes just a call off to the side if I need help with this or I need someone to understand, so no they didn't take the place of placement workers, and yes we do have placement workers.

Question 7: Okay because our placement, it's a little different where I live and work. Because when the children in my department are placed with a relative, they don't wait to be licensed and they also don't wait to get paid, so I think that's kind of a little different than the way it sounded that it happens where you are.

Tiffany Hesser: How do they, they can't be licensed in one day, so how does that?

Question 7: No they don't get licensed in one day but we do what we call a relative placement and that allows us to open the case, the treatment worker will open the case, and we are allowed to pay them right away because they can be paid right away before the license comes through.

Tiffany Hesser: Okay, and that's great. We have some access to some emergency funding and such, but our relative caregivers do not receive the full payment until they are completely licensed, so that's why it is so essential that we have some extra supports in helping them

expedite that process. And in addition to the placement teams we have a specialized relative licensing unit that the licensing workers are only working with relatives so the kinship liaisons are with them throughout the entire process, so it does sound a little different than your county.

Question 7: I think it really is a little different here.

Millicent Williams: Thank you very much. We have another question, *6.

Question 8: This is Margaret Booker, and I'm from Denver. I have been working in enhancing and developing broader support services for kinship families. I would like to know the person that could help us the most in terms of looking at the expediting of licensure. Now part of it may be that our requirements in this state are different than the requirements in your state. But we are very much interested in learning of other strategies to expedite that process, so if you could share more information about what are the strategies that you've used to actually decrease the time to certification for relative providers that might be transferable to other areas.

Tiffany Hesser: You've got it, I think that's really important information. I flipped back to a slide where there is some contact information, and they may ring my neck for doing this, and just so folks are aware the reason I'm not giving myself as a contact on this, as I stated previously I'm no longer working within the Clark County Department of Family Services, so I just love this program and love to talk about how we developed it, but you will see a contact on the right hand side for Lisa Ruiz Lee, I would say that she would probably be able to field these questions and get you in touch with the right folks within the agency currently, whether it's the people overseeing the relative licensing process or who she would say would be the best to answer your question.

Vanessa Lindsey: And I just want to give you just a little bit of what we did to streamline it. We came up with a smaller application for the relatives. They take a shortened training, which is more condensed classes but they are really getting all the meat and potatoes that they need to care for their family member that is placed with them. And if at any point they feel that they need any additional trainings on any of the topics, they are more than encouraged to take additional classes, and with the shortened application and the kinship classes, when we make the initial contact with them, we try to give them as much information, paperwork, the application, everything that they need up front because when the placement takes place, they're worried about getting the children in school, they may need beds, they may need clothing, so knowing that they have that information on hand and once they get a little situated, they can slowly start working on that application, and in the meantime we are contacting them, asking them if there is anything that we can do for them, is this an option they would like to take while this case is open, just whatever we can do to speed up the process, and if we know that this is something that they are interested in doing right away, we meet with them. Sometimes we meet with them three times a week, sometimes we meet with them right when the placement occurs, we mail the package, if we need to meet with them at home, at work, while they are in between appointments, we do whatever we can to get that paperwork back and turned in.

Tiffany Hesser: I think that much of what we discussed that there were simultaneously things going on in the agency, like we recognize that maybe we need to change our training schedule

and accessibility to these trainings and uniquely putting them with other relative caregivers, you know and just kind of making our end of the process a bit quicker in combination with the support that the kinship liaisons are able to provide of checking in with them again, following up with them, “are you stuck somewhere, have you forgotten something, can I help you by offering you some resources or something like that.”

Question 8: Thank you very much for that information. May I ask one other point of clarification, and that is your relationship to your state. We happen to be a county administered state supervised system...

Tiffany Hesser: As are we.

Question 8: So my question to you would be, what were some of the strategies with the state that you used to get some of these changes made for relatives, so for example, our state any relative family that’s going to be notified has to fill out the exact same application, because we’ve tried to talk with the state about doing something abbreviated or being different than foster care that we do with straight foster care, non-related foster care, and we don’t get much positive response on that. The other area that I’d like to know is did you get state support for the condensing of the training?

Millicent Williams: And I just want to interrupt, please answer that question and we just want to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to ask questions.

Tiffany Hesser: And I’m going to give a kind of short answer and a deferred answer, I think if you contact Lisa Ruiz Lee she will be able to speak a little bit more about that or put you in touch with folks. I can tell you there were absolute challenges. We had a [inaudible] child welfare system when we started this project where county handled CPS investigations and the state was still responsible for the permanency end of things, so it was very disjointed. Under our Child and Family Services Reviews, our state legislature required us to combine it all under the county so we were going through that transition of the county taking over the permanency end of things, so there were a lot of simultaneous things going on. I think that there are a lot of challenges in working that way, so talk to Lisa Ruiz Lee further about that or she will direct you to the right person in the agency.

I’ve not been with the agency for two years, so some of my experiences would be talking about what it was like back then and it’s difficult for me to speak about some of the here and now.

Millicent Williams: Okay, thank you. Anyone else have a question for our presenters? *6.

Tiffany Hesser: Alright, maybe that’s it.

Millicent Williams: I know we would love to have our presenters around to speak to you all day, but I wanted to just call your attention to the last couple of slides. On the first slide the Clark County has developed this wonderful video, which has caregivers sharing some of their experiences and you’ll be able to get that from the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. You also were referred to Lisa Lee, for questions regarding the Clark

County program, and on the next slide you will see that these are resources that all are available to you from childwelfare.gov. There are also nine infrastructure toolkits on Systems of Care and you can get really terrific information from those toolkits. So I'd like to thank our presenters for a very informative presentation, and as I've said, I'm sure we'd love to hear you talk for another couple of hours, so thank you again for your expertise and for all of the wonderful work you are doing and have done in Clark County, Nevada. And I'd like to thank our participants for supporting this webinar, and again you will be able to get the audio and the transcript of this webinar from Childwelfare.gov, the entire website is provided here on the slide for you, so thank you so much for participating.

Nicole Bossard: At NRCPFC.org there are a host of additional resources related to family connections and the entire spectrum of permanency issues as well as kinship of course, that's another place for you to go to receive some free resources and we just want to send a shout out to the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections for supporting this webinar.

Millicent Williams: Thank you, and that's where you can get the video from Clark County, so thanks a lot for that. There are a lot of resources out there folks, so hopefully you will avail yourself of them. Thank you!