

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – Child Welfare Then and Now

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Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Sekema Harmon, State of Georgia Division of Family and Children Services

00:00:00 [Music Introduction]

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

**TOM OATES** [00:00:33]: Well hi everyone, and welcome in to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. Tom Oates, here, and I'm gonna start this episode with a question. What's the value of experience? Well, you could say the value comes in using your experience to hopefully make wise decisions. There's a value in sharing your experience with others so they can learn, improve or gain a bit of knowledge that will serve them in the days to come.

[00:00:58]: Well, today on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, we're going to tap into the experience of one social worker from Georgia, who's spent nearly three decades working in child welfare. Now, what we want to do is let everyone listening benefit from her experience. Whether you've got nearly thirty years under your belt or you're just starting out in your social work career, I'd like to give you a sense of some of the lessons learned from one person, and her stories are something you can share with others or take to heart as you continue your professional journey.

[00:01:29]: Plus, we're gonna get a big picture sense of how Georgia's entire system has learned from its own experience, to modernize its approach to working with partners and families. So welcome to Child Welfare: Then and Now.

[00:01:42]: We sat down and chatted with Sekema Harmon, Field Operations Director for the State of Georgia's Division of Family and Children Services - an absolute blast to talk with. Some of the things I want you to look out for is her realization when she was a young direct service provider about the importance of meeting families at their level.

[00:02:01]: We also talk about Georgia's effort to get out into the community through a roadshow called Blueprint for Change. We also talk about how the entire field has changed over time, along with addressing the challenges in managing staff and helping them maintain their passion for the work.

[00:02:18]: You know, it, it's rare we get a chance to just chat with somebody about their career and the path they've navigated through child welfare, but today, we get to do just that. So, in a bit more than thirty minutes, we travel through nearly thirty years of child welfare with Sekema Harmon.

[00:02:38]: So, Sekema Harmon, welcome to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:02:42]: Thank you.

**TOM OATES** [00:02:43]: So, let's just start, you know, we titled this Then and Now, so let's do a little bit of that. Over the near three decades that you've had, you know, one of the big things we always talk about is how direct service is, is being applied, you know how, how professionals are working directly

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with families. But it's all coming up from an, an agency level with big target outcomes and goals. When you look back to when you started to where you are now, what are the biggest shifts you've seen in those target outcomes and goals that agencies are looking to accomplish?

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:03:13]: Well, when I started almost twenty eight years ago, when, three days on the job, the director then - Michael Thurman - said that, Doug Greenwood said that we have a paradigm shift. I was straight out of college and I was trying to figure out what paradigm shift, I just got here, what are we changing, what are we shifting to? And the main focus then was to help families help themselves. To go into families and work with them on some of the stress that they already had.

[00:03:41]: We know that families know more about themselves than we ever will know, so when I started out straight out of college, I started with the premise of I go in and I tell people what to do, they do it, and then I go somewhere else, I go to another family. That was then - didn't understand moving towards helping families help themselves and moving towards giving families the resources that they need to help themselves, was really what the agency needed in order to not be in families lives forever.

[00:04:07]: So, looking back then - I was a little younger than I am now - looking back then, I did not realize that we needed the community of resources that we do now to help our families, I did not realize that we were just a conduit to families making a change and making a difference in their lives, I didn't realize that.

[00:04:26]: So, over the years - after coming in these twenty-eight years - I've realized that it takes everybody to make this difference in families lives. It takes the agency, it takes community partners, it takes non-profit, it takes the faith-based. It takes a whole bunch of organizations working together for the common good to help our families and families don't come to us because they want to, sometimes, they come to us because they have to. And so, we have to be ready to provide for them the resources and the services they need.

[00:04:54]: A lot of times, they know what they need, they just need help getting to what they need. So, the shift for me is looking at how, then we just, the case managers, I had a certain area, I covered that whole area was families, or if I had, you know, I just focused on the CPS portion of it and somebody else took the foster care portion of it. What I realize now, it takes all of us, it's a continuum of service, you know.

[00:05:19]: We look at families starting from the front door and we need to provide services throughout the entire time we're in their lives, so they can exit our house without having to need us again in the future. So, just a shift in the way we provide services, shift in the agreements we have with organizations, with the court system, with the judicial system, with law enforcement, with other agencies to help us get to where want to get with our families, which is one, have them provide safety for their children, and two, not to need an agency to help them do that.

**TOM OATES** [00:05:48]: You know, you, you bring two entities that you're talking about with the professionals, they've gotta work, work with, partner with the families and then also partnering with those, those other agencies and those other members of the community. And so, I want to pull on both of those for a second. When you had to make that paradigm shift and you had to realize I'm not directing a family, I have to work with and engage and they're gonna be a part of the process - as a young professional, because there are plenty of young professionals coming in now that have to, maybe make that shift that I'm not dealing with an assignment, I'm dealing with a continuous work in progress -

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how did you prepare, or learn, the best ways to be able to engage a family, because every family's different, and every situation's different.

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:06:34]: Right. So, you know, looking at my own family, you know, their dynamics in their own family, you know, everybody has a role, everybody plays a part in the family, and our families that we serve are no different. They have roles, they have responsibilities. But I also had to realize that where the family was is where they thought they needed to be.

[00:06:50]: All of us look at our families and say this is what's normal to us. And so, I had to really look at their normalcy and to try to help them with where they were at that moment in time and that moment in their, in their families lives. So, I had to not go in and bring my own values, I can remember as a young case manager wanting to help a mom and I thought my help was to tell her, don't you want to get a better job, don't you want to go to college, don't you want to do this? Because that's where I came from, that's what I understood and what I knew.

[00:07:19]: And what she said to me, then, Ms. Harris, she said that this was good enough for her family, her mom, her grandmother, it was good enough for her. And that really changed my mindset, where going and telling families, or giving families my prescription on what to do and how to do it. I had to meet them where they were and I had to understand that what they were experiencing was normal for them, so I had to help them maybe see a better way - add to, not better way, but an add to what they were already doing to keep their children safe and their families safe.

[00:07:47]: You know, I come from a culture, too, where people take care of their families, they didn't need an agency, necessarily. You took care of your families, but you looked for agencies or resources within that community to help you with that, with DEBACS, we're sort of that guiding force to that, we sort of help and direct that family member to those agencies that they need. But, it was hard as a young person, 'cause I thought, you know I go in with my little clipboard and I check off this is what you're supposed to do. If you do this, then this will happen, if you do this, then this will happen - and, I'm gone.

[00:08:17]: But, you know, having families who taught me, you know, coming straight out of college, you can't do it like that. And also, understanding and trusting that, again, the way they solve their problems might be a little different than the way I solve my problems. I can remember clearly a mother telling me, too, I did a case plan for her - hence, I did a case plan for her - and the case plan was that you need to go to treatment, you need to go to these classes every week. And she said okay and she signed the plan - I'm thinking, a young case manager, wow, she's really gonna make a change, she's gonna stop her habits, she's gonna make sure her child has what she needs.

[00:08:54]: And, every day, every week, this person, this young mother would go to this class, sign in and leave. And, so when I checked to see what the progress she was making, there was no progress, she was still where she was and I couldn't understand that. I came in as a case manager, I told you what you need to do, we did a case plan, you signed it, what's the problem? She said, you told me to go to the class, you didn't tell me I had to stay and learn anything.

[00:09:18]: And so, I learned early on that in order, I had to take sometimes, leave my culture outside of the door, or what I believe and what I thought and really meet them where they were and help them explain and understand how what you're gonna do is gonna be a benefit to your child going in the future. But, I learned a valuable lesson with her - I just had, could not just tell her, write a case plan for her, but I had to use her informal resources, I had to use her knowledge of how she thought best that

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she could handle her, her addiction that she had - and back then it was just marijuana, it wasn't what we're experiencing now - but, you know, she said to me, when I smoke marijuana, I smoke it on the back porch, with my child, my child is in, in bed, she's had her food, she's had her homework, she's fine, I go on the back porch, I don't do it in front of her, what's the problem?

[00:10:06]: I had to learn early on, woah, hmm, how do I, how do I answer that one? So, it was with the support of a wonderful supervisor, too, that helped me to walk through and not to just take face value what the family said, that she was going to this treatment and that she was smoking pot and it wasn't a big deal for her, but I had to understand. And so that came with the supervision, it came with the training, it came with experience and it came with me wanting to stick with this work and actually help this mom see a difference that she can make in her family's life by doing those things that together we've come up with that's gonna help her mitigate the safety needs for her children.

**TOM OATES** [00:10:40]: You know, you talked about where you learned all of that and through your peers, through experiences - as much as the Schools of Social Work are teaching so much to, to these young professionals, there is something about boots on the ground learning that just has to take time, I mean, so I want to kind of put ourselves back in the, in the shoes of those who are just in their first year and this is all coming to them, that you know, I'm assuming there's this formula that it's supposed to work x, y and z - it, it just doesn't work that way.

[00:11:15]: What were those key moments, and maybe those key people, when you talked about learning, you know, what were those kind of, key lessons that where you kind of said, oh, you know, maybe it's not always the light bulb pops on, but you know, what are those key moments that you're seeing from your past that really taught you those lessons?

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:11:31]: Well, I had to give it the credit to a wonderful supervisor and a wonderful county director, who, as a new worker sat down with me and talked with me and spent time with me and asked questions. One of the things that my supervisor would do is instead of just me walking into her office saying, hey, I got a problem, can you solve it? She would say to me it's okay to come with problems but also come with the solutions.

[00:12:00]: So, she helped me with my critical thinking. She helped me to develop that you have to look to see what resources and what things you need to be able to do to help the family. But you also got to know, you gotta know the policy, you gotta know that every family is different and individualized and you gotta know that you gotta meet them and talk with them at where they are and not just a broad brush stroke of every family is the same.

[00:12:26]: So, having that supervisor and that county director who walked me through – you know, I wouldn't be here, twenty eight years without those folks, you know, they, they helped me to understand the commitment that it was gonna take, they helped me to understand that, you know, this is not a job that you're, one, gonna get rich. That's not the goal, or two, that you might be able to save every single person. But that one person that you help, that's gonna permeate through the rest of that family, and that child is gonna learn those skills and permeate through her life with her children.

[00:12:56]: So, I had to learn early on, 'cause I started out bright eyed and bushy tailed, that first year - I'm gonna save the world, I'm gonna go in and save the world - and I had to learn that by saving one, if I can, one at a time was gonna help have an impact on the world being better. So, my supervisor, my county director, they spent the time with me, it was an opportunity for me to sit with them and learn

and talk with them and share and ask questions, be inquisitive. It was an opportunity for me to hear their experiences, it was an opportunity to, to see modeled for me, those folks who had stayed here and who were invested into this work.

[00:13:32]: You know, then, people stayed forever, you know, they retired, or we used to tease and say, you know, you'd never get a supervisor's position, because people die in those positions. You know, jokingly, as a young person, but, you know, that's changing. People have so many different ways to help. But this profession, being social work, being working for the Division of Family and Children Services is a noble profession and it's one that I, I love, I mean I wouldn't be doing anything but this.

[00:13:57]: So that supervisor, that county director, that county director's still in my life, she's still one of my mentors. I see her every week and we talk and we share and she is guiding me, even though she's retired twenty years, she's guided me in, into being a servant leader and I think that's just important that you have that kind of support for a first year person coming in.

[00:14:19]: You have that kind of support with the peers who are saying, you know, it's gonna take you a year or two to get this right, to really understand and get your feet wet and know exactly what you're doing, but until then, you know, take every opportunity to attend training, take every opportunity to serve on committees, take every opportunity to talk with someone who's been there, you know, and ask them questions, be inquisitive, ask questions, you know, what, what do, what was it like for you and what do you see that I'm doing well, or maybe areas of improvement that I need to have and not just checking off that you got this done, let's move to the next thing. So, that's the basis for me.

**TOM OATES** [00:14:56]: You know, you talked about also that, yeah, the bright eyes, bushy tailed I'm gonna be the one to save the world - the key word there is one and it can't be just one, it's not one person, you mentioned your supervisors and the families are gonna be a part of it. But early on, you also talked about those other agencies and those other partnerships that need to be part of this, you know, kind of holistic approach to dealing with, with a family and with the communities.

[00:15:21]: Over your time, talk to me about how agencies have approached those partners, you know, in terms of engaging them more, or engaging them differently - how are we seeing over time the shift change to how child welfare agencies are working with those around them?

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:15:35]: Well, I, I can remember some time ago, Tom, when I first started there, I worked with a program called PEACH - it was Positive Employment and Community Help - and it was an organization that reached out to community partners to bring them on board with helping our mothers who were in need of services or in need of additional assistance to keep their children in their homes, and keep their children safe.

[00:15:57]: So, it was a whole ploy for people to come aboard and hear what we were doing as an agency and to see what they could do you know, as a young person I prided myself on I actually had an organization who donated a van to the agency I was working at the time to help us transport mothers to job interviews, or help us transport mothers to get medical needs for their children. And so, they bought into the premise that if we help our mothers and our fathers and our children, it's just gonna make our community stronger. We're gonna have more viable employment, we're gonna have more families who are just being productive citizens, in particular our children in the community.

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[00:16:32]: So, it was an opportunity for that. You know, coming up in the years, I, I love family connection partnership, I think that's one of the best agencies that we can partner with because we're all serving the same folks, let's just pool our resources together to do an even stronger effort at it. The CASAs that we work with, those agencies, who have again, they, they're looking at the needs of the children and they're working with us to see what's going on in the families to make good assessments of how families are improving.

[00:17:00]: So, those are a few of the agencies that I've worked with over the years and, and have helped bring along with the work that we do to serve our families and children, but we can't forget about our judicial system, our judges, they are key components to us making it right with our families and our families getting it right together and having the resources that they need.

[00:17:18]: So there's so many agencies that I can tap into that without them, we can't do our work, it is a collective effort, we are not an island alone and we cannot just be brokers of services without those service providers providing the good services that we need. We have a lot of private agencies that are working with us to make sure our children get the therapeutic needs that they have. We have a lot of agencies that are providing childcare for us and child placing agencies with us to make sure our children get where they need, the treatment that they need.

[00:17:49]: And our therapists, as well. There's so many partners out there that collectively we're pulling together our resources to make sure that our children are first of all, getting what they need and secondly, are being able to sustain what they get from these agencies, in order to help them become better children and productive citizens. But, meet their needs, more than anything.

**TOM OATES** [00:18:09]: So, for those, you know, those managers, or, or those folks who are in charge of making sure that those partnerships thrive, where they don't have partnerships or where these partnerships aren't as strong, what are the keys in terms of making sure that those partnerships are successful? Because everybody's busy and everybody's got their own tasks to deal with - they see the overlaps, but how do you guys make sure that those partnerships always are, are as strong as they can be?

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:18:36]: Well, one of the things I, I can say off the bat is with our former division director, Bobby Cagel and our current interim division director, Ginger Pryor, both of them over forty months ago coined what we call the Blueprint for Change here in Georgia. And, there are three pillars for that Blueprint for Change, and one of those pillars is the constituent engagement, so it starts with relationship building, it starts with us talking to those constituents in the community, it starts with us talking with those agencies that are, we see that can really bring value added to the work that we're doing, so it's about relationship building, we can't stand over here ourselves on an island and do this work without those relationships building.

[00:19:20]: So, our leaders have led by preset the example, by going out into communities, we, we have our leaders - which is unheard of, almost, in some child welfare jurisdictions - they're going to communities, they're not asking people to come to them, they're going to communities and saying, you know, this is what we need for you to do to help us, and we want to help you, as well. So, they're talking with the judges, they're talking with the school systems, they're talking with law enforcement, they're talking with our CASAs and our community agencies, our hospitals.

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[00:19:50]: They're talking with all of those folks who are actually, one, some of them make reports to us and two, they see the children and families a little bit more than we might because of what, what they're involved in particular, the school system. So, they're going out, we're going out into communities and talking with these folks and saying this is what we need to do together, you know, to make sure that we're building the bridge for our families.

[00:20:10]: So, constituent engagement is a big piece of what we're doing here in Georgia, along with our robust workforce and our, our plan of action, which we are calling our solution-based casework - which is just good old fashioned casework - having a plan that everybody is consistent across the State of Georgia in how we're delivering our services.

[00:20:29]: But with those two things, we gotta have constituent engagement, we gotta build the relationship, we gotta change the image that people see with child welfare agencies - historically, people see us as baby snatchers, or people see us as, families see us as people who are not helping, but we gotta go in helping them - and how we do that is we change our image, we change our brand, we talk about what we want do with the families, not to the families, or for the families, but with the families.

[00:20:55]: So, constituent engagement is I, I can't emphasize it how important that is, bringing everybody to the table with their resources, no one turf guarding, everyone saying this is for our community, this is for our families and our children, our children being our biggest resource, so let's pool together, let's add value to the conversation by saying what we can do to make sure that our goal is reached for safety in families.

**TOM OATES** [00:21:17]: It sounds like you've got this network, you know this safety in numbers and all of these various agencies that are kind of breaking down the silos, kind of working together. Talk to me over what you've seen in how that came about - because, yeah you can get everybody at a table, but it's not like in five minutes everybody's gonna be nodding their head together and, and riding along the same path - what does it go to building that kind of network?

[00:21:41]: And then, you know, you talked about the solution building - what has Georgia seen over the past few years, in terms of the, the network to kind of or the work to create this network?

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:21:50]: Well, for the past forty months, we have started our Blueprint for Change, and we're now moving towards becoming a state of hope, where the entire Georgia is on board with communities coming together to make a positive change in families. But, you know, what I've seen is, again, it takes the leadership who are going to entities and organizations and communities to say, you know, this is we're, we're being transparent, we have not done the best job ourselves by ourselves, so we have to have these partnerships.

[00:22:21]: So, we've gone to these partners, we talk with them about what it is that we need, we, we've sat down at the table, we've had a leadership that's gone to our, our legislature and our governor to say this is what we need, and had a governor that really supported our initiatives to make change in our families. So, we've had folks who've gone to the communities, we talk with them, we've sat with them, we've said this is what it's gonna take and we need you to be on board with this.

[00:22:46]: So, Georgia's moving towards a state of hope, we've had a Blueprint for Change, we've built our blueprint, it's taken us some time, we're still moving towards that, but Georgia's going through, going to what we call a state of hope.

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[00:22:57]: But, to become a state of hope, you gotta have those people, you gotta have that buy-in, you gotta have communities that say we have problem within our communities, so we're gonna solve the problems within our community. So, let's come together as small pockets in the community and spread that across the State of Georgia so that everybody has the buy-in to, to making a difference by coming to the table with the resources.

[00:23:17]: So, forty years ago when former director Cagel and current interim director Pryor started this, we looked at when Georgia had, the problems that we had - and, again, we had some issues - we looked at those problems and we said, what are the main things we needed to do in order to mitigate some of those problems. And one of the things was talk with the community. Go there and say, we can't solve this ourselves, or by ourselves, we need the help of our community constituents, so let's pool together.

[00:23:45]: So, not, it wasn't a one-time thing, for two years, it took our leadership to go across the State of Georgia to meet with communities. We had, then, fifteen regions - we have fourteen regions now - and they went to every single one of those regions, 159 counties, in the State of Georgia. And we sat with those and talked about what it is that we need.

[00:24:04]: So, it's not an overnight, it's not a five minute conversation, it's a continuous conversation. We also have a conversation once a month with all of our judges in the State of Georgia within each region and we talk about what do you see that we need to do to improve on and how can you help us with that? And one of the things our judges are doing, which is awesome, is talking with these new case managers - this is what we expect, this is what we need, this is what we need you to know, this is how we can work with you, and we wanna help you to, to take care of families.

[00:24:31]: So, it's not a one-time conversation, it's a conversation that happens over some time, it's a conversation that happens consistently and continuously and we're seeing benefits from that. We're seeing the complaints are lessened. Now folks aren't just calling and complaining about what we haven't done, they're calling to thank us for some of the things that we are doing, that they see that we're doing in our communities.

[00:24:53]: And that's a, that's a positive, when you see you're moving towards from a negative brand to a positive brand, you can see the difference in the way our families are working with the resources that they have, you can see the difference in our community agencies partnering and talking about not what you haven't done, but what we can do together - that's just a really good sign of we're moving in the right direction to become a state of hope for Georgia.

**TOM OATES** [00:25:15]: And that gets back to what we talked about when we first started the conversation - the individual, you know, the, the, that worker that's just starting out, that's part of this entire process. How do you rope in those young professionals, those direct service caseworkers, who may not be young, you know, they may be, you know, entrenched veterans, but they're part of this huge process and when you're that just, when you feel like you're just one person and you realize how daunting it can be - how do you rope that individual to A, get the buy-in from them at the grassroots level, but to realize that they are part of this huge network that is making a difference?

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:25:51]: Right, so one of the things that I, I love that we're doing here in, in Georgia is we are asking people about their why. Why do you wanna do this work? So we're going back

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to the basics so people can understand you're in this for a reason. Most of us who do this hard work are in it because we love and we wanna take care of families and we wanna make a difference. Again, not to get rich, 'cause I, I'll, I guess I'll do that in my next life - but, we go back to asking our staff members why are you here? Why do you wanna do this? You know, it takes special people to do this, you can't, everybody is not called to do this work and you just can't do it because it's a job, it has to be a calling and it has to be a career.

[00:26:32]: So, for that new case manager, or that seasoned case manager, who might need a new reboot or a boost to this, we talk about your why - go back to why you wanna do this work. Go back to why you wanna help families, 'cause all of us started out with, you know, we wanna make a difference, what does that mean? Break that down into the lowest common denominator of why do you wanna do this and then connect with those other people who have a similar why.

[00:26:56]: When we have conferences and workshops, we talk with our staff about that, it's amazing how you hear people's story. One story maybe, you know, I grew up in the system, so I really wanna make a difference. Or, I saw how the difference was made in my families, or not made in my family, and I wanna, to add to that, or I wanna, you know, change that trajectory of child welfare. Or you have families who, who have adopted, or fostered and they wanna continue that - I know one family in our state, eleven members in that family and all of them foster and adopt family, so it's been a legacy in that family that everybody does this, everybody buys into the why, child welfare with them.

[00:27:37]: So, our case managers, when they seem like they are, you know, by themselves, that's when they have to have a supportive unit and a supportive supervisor and county director and on up the leadership, here at the state office. You know, we're support to the field, as we call it, we are here to help and guide and we're here to partner and we're here to help you with resources that you might need if you need a reboosting or you need some additional training.

[00:28:01]: And we're also looking at revamping our training such that, case managers are not just getting the book learning, but they're also getting real life experience time, you know, we're doing some fidelity reviews to make sure that we're finding out the people who are doing the work the right way, what can we learn from them to share with everyone else, so that they also see that they're not by themselves.

[00:28:22]: We're looking at talking with our case managers who are doing a good job and using them as examples - this is what, you know, it takes and this is what this person does and how you can use some of these resources to help you. So, it's a lot of things that are being done to help our case managers who are, you know, feeling by themselves, you know, for case managers to be able to reach out to our division director - that's huge for them to get a personal email or phone call from our division director or our deputy director or our field operation director. That's huge for them to say, you know, I'm not by myself, they're not just sitting there expecting me to do this alone, they're here with me, partnering to make a difference in the lives of families and children.

**TOM OATES** [00:29:01]: You brought up something that I was thinking about as you started to talk about, you know, you get into the, you know, asking the individual of the why, why are they involved, kind of rebooting them. And then I was gonna ask you, but you led right to it - how are you then supporting them, how are then, you know, is that, that kind of, environment to foster their own growth - be it growth as a leader, growth as a manager, growth as, as an individual. How have you seen, if we want to get back to the whole then and now theme - how have you seen that kind of professional

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development culture change from when you first started to where you talked about now and how that whole support of growing the culture and the environment and the person - how have you seen that change over the past number of years?

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:29:47]: Well, to be honest with you, Tom, when I first started as a case manager in 1990, 91, I never dreamed that I would be where I am now. I didn't dream big enough then, but now one of my goals is to help our staff members dream bigger. I meet staff across the State of Georgia, I always ask them for thirty years. And, I'm known for asking for thirty year commitment and what I say to them is I not asking you for thirty years in your position, I'm asking you for thirty years of service, moving up in different positions, equipping yourself that you can move from where you are now to where you wanna be.

[00:30:24]: Moving to take my position - I think a good leader always trains someone or prepares someone to take his or her position. And so, I always tell them that. So, in the State of Georgia, we're working on a career ladder for our staff members. We have opportunities with school systems, college systems that we help, it's our IV-E program where we allow individuals time to go and further their education and then they in turn give us that time back, that commitment back, 'cause we helped them. So, our career ladder - helping people build their resources and build their skillset to move to the next level.

[00:30:59]: And when you invest in your staff like that, you get more commitment, you get more, your turnover is less, you get folks who really, really wanna be here and really see a career, or calling, job calling for this. And you have folks who wanna stay, you know, I, I when I started this job in 90, 91, I actually went to college for something different. I wanted to be a radio and television broadcaster, so I have that experience in communications, but I covered my first story at a group home, a children's home - and the bug hit me and I said this is what I'm supposed to do. So, for me it was not a job, it was a calling that I felt that I really have to do this.

[00:31:40]: So, I took it upon myself, again, to go get another degree in this area so that I could fulfill that. So, you know, having folks who go to college for social work or sociology or those majors that are congruent to doing this work - helping them understand that's your basis, now we're here to give you that real life experience that you need to help you grow and develop to be the, one, the best person that you can be in this job, and two, when you're, when you're equipped and you feel supported and you feel like you have the foundation that you need, you can pass that onto families and help them see how they can actually do that as well with the resources that they have.

[00:32:14]: So, I'm a firm believer in supporting our staff, I do ask them for thirty year commitment, I tell them it's gonna go by in like two weeks, I promise you, you're gonna wake up one day and thirty years are gonna be gone. And but it, this is a profession that you, you can do it for the rest of your life because it's all about helping people to grow and develop, so, career ladder is very important for us, here in Georgia, with our staff members.

**TOM OATES** [00:32:37]: And you bring up something really interesting when it comes to developing staff, is you ask for that thirty year commitment, but in turn, they are hearing I want to invest in you for thirty years. And no matter where you work, if you have employers, if you have a company or an agency you work for that sees you for the long term, that does not see you as, you know, a, a, an employee number, or a position and that actually looks at you as the growth potential, that, that empowers

somebody a little bit and then you can see that's where that buy-in kind of starts, is you want them to buy-in to the program - well it's always good when the program buys into them.

[00:33:19]: So, you know, so talk to me about what you've done, you, you've had a number of positions within the field - what would you then say to those, those new managers, those new supervisors in dealing with that younger staff, you know, especially 'cause the staff coming out today has a different skillset than maybe those who came out in the 90's when, when you just made your foray into the field.

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:33:43]: Right. So, I had had a number of positions, I started as a front-line case manager, which is the basis for knowing everything, I think in child welfare. Having that experience, going into homes, going, knocking on doors and as one of my co-workers said, then what happens after that, after the knock, what happens. So, I think that having that experience has helped me tremendously to, to, to advance where I am. I tell people I could care less about position or title, but it's more about what that position does to move the work and to help the families.

[00:34:21]: So, it is different, you're right, our, our, our young people today out of college are much different than I was almost thirty years ago, starting into this work. And we have to, as, as leaders and as, as the administrators and supervisors, we have to meet them where they are, as well, so we have to use what skillset they have - they are technologically savvy, they can do some things that we hadn't even thought about - and we have to use that, we can't just conform them to the way it was, 'cause they, they're gonna move us to the next level, as it relates to child welfare.

[00:34:53]: So, there, when I started, again, I used to have these little forms that you carry around with you - now we have tablets and now we have, you know, cellphones, I could remember my beeper going off at church one Sunday thinking, oh my God, but and I had to leave church, the choir stand to go and answer a call. Now, it's at my fingertips, almost. So, we have to take that technology and the use of that and the young people who can help us advance that, take that and use that to help us move the work that we need to move.

[00:35:23]: But, you know, I, I've had the pleasure of serving in several capacities - from case management, supervision, county director, regional director, now to field operations director - and every job, I say, has been my favorite until the next one comes. But, I love what I do, I would not trade it for the world. I would do this even if it were, if I didn't even get paid for it, I would do this because this is where my heart is and I love what we do.

[00:35:54]: So, sharing that with case managers, having case managers - I travel around the state often and I go to counties and I meet with staff and I go and sit into offices and sometimes when I show up, they're like, oh my God, Miss Harmon is here what's going on, what's wrong. I wanna change that, I want people to look at us as, you know, the leaders as something's wrong when we appear - I'm here to support you, I'm here to share with you. And for them, to hear, sometimes, my story of, you know, I was a front line case manager, as well, gives them hope and helps them see, you know, that I can do this, as well - 'cause I tell them, if I can do it, you can do it.

[00:36:28]: So, it helps them to build that, build their skillset and it's to see down the future. Our young people now, sometimes unfortunately they're, they don't, they come in looking for other opportunities, and I wanna get them before they start looking for other opportunities to say this is the best opportunity that you can have, to make a difference in lives of families and children.

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**TOM OATES** [00:36:46]: And you tell them that your thirty years aren't done yet, so there's, it sounds like there's still more from you and maybe a few more beyond the thirty years, from what I hear.

**SEKEMA HARMON** [00:36:56]: Oh yeah, you're gonna have to wheel me out of here.

**TOM OATES** [00:36:58]: Sekema, I want to thank you so much, not only for, for your experience and sharing with us, but spending the time here, on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast to give us a little bit of perspective of, of then, but now, but also moving toward the future. Thank you so much.

[00:37:16]: For a greater sense on how the entire field of child welfare and social work has changed, there's some really great tools on the Children's Bureau's website - the Children's Bureau's Centennial Page has a great interactive timeline, so that you can see the actions, laws, policies going more than a hundred years back that have shaped the focus of child welfare. From the early years of infant mortality and prenatal care to, as the focus shifts, to truancy and preventing child abuse and neglect and foster care as we move into today.

[00:37:47]: The Children's Bureau also has a great e-Book that's been used, actually, in schools of social work to help educate students who are interested in a career in child welfare. So, on this podcast's webpage, we link you to those materials, just jump on over to [acf.hhs.gov/cb](http://acf.hhs.gov/cb). We've also included links to realistic job previews. So this is collection of videos made by states that showcase a day in the life of child welfare professionals. This is a great tool for young people interested in the field to get a real sense of what the work - and it is work - what all that work entails.

[00:38:26]: I want to thank Sekema Harmon again, she could not have been more generous with her time and in sharing her experience and her passion with us. And hopefully, you found some value along the way. So, that'll wrap it up for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, we appreciate each and every one of you for the time you spend with us each month - so until next month, I'm Tom Oates from Information Gateway. Thanks for listening.

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:38:54]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at [childwelfare.gov](http://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.