

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
Changing the Face of Foster Care TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Dr. Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner, Children's Bureau

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

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:02]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:34]: Welcome everyone to this episode of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Tom Oates with you here again. And this month, we are really happy to have been able to sit down and talk with Dr. Jerry Milner, the Associate Commissioner at the Children's Bureau about approaching systemic change within child welfare – especially regarding Foster Care. And we're launching this episode in conjunction with National Foster Care Month 2020, which is recognized each May. Now the National Foster Care Month 2020 website, that is already live with information and resources for caregivers, child welfare professionals, community organizations, and those connected to foster care, including children and youth, to create awareness and spread the word about the importance of supporting those families and young people impacted by foster care. You can head on over to the National Foster Care Month 2020 site at www.Childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth and you can check out the site for yourself.

[00:01:33]: So the theme for this year's National Foster Care Month is "Foster Care as a support to families, not a substitute for parents" – which actually repeats the theme from last year and so, we dive into why that's so with Dr. Milner – touching on the work to change the misconceptions and incorporating the perspectives of children, youth and families who are involved in foster care. We also dive into what the Federal Government is doing to from its position to help spark change, and what he's hearing from those state and local child welfare agencies about the issues and trends that they are facing today. Now, Jerry's got more than 40 years of practice, management, and technical assistance in child welfare. Before taking over as Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau, he served as the Vice President for Child Welfare Practice at the Center for the Support of Families, and that's where he assisted state and local agencies in evaluating their child welfare programs, and helped design and implement improvements in practice, policy and procedures.

[00:02:32]: Jerry also served as state child welfare director in Alabama and had a previous stint with the Children's Bureau; implementing and managing the Child and Family Service Reviews of state child welfare programs. Really glad to have the opportunity to have this conversation and to share it with you. So, let's get right to it – we're chatting about systemic change in foster care with Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau, Dr. Jerry Milner.

[00:02:58]: Dr. Jerry Milner, welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

JERRY MILNER [00:03:01]: Thank you.

TOM OATES [00:03:02]: So, let's just start it off, we're talking about National Foster Care Month, and the Children's Bureau for the second year in a row is highlighting the theme of foster care as a support to families, not as a substitute for parents. Why the emphasis for the second straight year?

JERRY MILNER [00:03:18]: You know, we're able to get a lot of agreement around the need to move foster care to be more of a support to families at a very high level when we're going around the country talking about this whole concept. But actually moving a foster care system to a place where it really is a true support for families requires very significant systemic change. It goes to the very values, the very beliefs that we have about families whose children may need foster care and what the purpose of foster care is. It requires time, it requires commitment and it requires a significant investment of effort to begin to make that change. We believe it's important to do that, obviously, because we've seen so much success in this area, we've seen communities that have implemented this strategy where parents of children and resource families, foster families are able to work successfully together to give children what they need to increase the chances that families can be reunited to allow children to thrive even when it's not possible for them to live under the same roof as their parents for some temporary period of time.

[00:04:51]: In order to do that, we have to work hard to eliminate some of the misconceptions that parents whose children need foster care are inherently bad or that resource families should not have relationships with parents. We know that when those relationships are able to be there, that parents have the opportunity to strengthen their ability to care for their children in safe ways. We know that the trauma of separating children from parents is reduced and we know that we have much greater opportunities for children and parents to be reunited. So, it's just overall critically important to us to move our foster care system in the direction of being much more of a support to families rather than its more traditional role was to substitute for parents.

TOM OATES [00:05:47]: So, there's a lot under that big system change umbrella. And so, as we get into National Foster Care Month itself, what is the Children's Bureau looking at in terms of, alright here are our most important priorities, here are our most important goals when we think about National Foster Care Month?

JERRY MILNER [00:06:04]: I think I can say hands down preventing the need for foster care is our most important goal for foster care. If we do our work to prevent children from having to suffer the trauma of maltreatment and if they do, unfortunately, suffer that trauma to strengthen families to be able to care for them without removal, then we will be taking giant steps toward preventing the need for foster care to ever happen in the first place. Foster care should be seen as the absolute last resort for maintaining the safety of children, but historically, our programs have been funded and our policies have been oriented so that it becomes, in many situations, our first intervention or our primary intervention and we want to change that so that it's only used when it's absolutely necessary to protect the safety and the health of children.

[00:07:10]: And the second priority is what we've just discussed - when it is absolutely necessary, we want to make sure that children, that young people who come into the foster care system have as much of a normal experience as they can possibly have in what is inherently an abnormal situation. Another huge priority for us - and this goes, I think to our focus on adoption of older youth and on attending to the needs of youth who are in the foster care system - we'd like to get to the place in our country where aging out of the foster care system without permanency in the lives of children is simply not an option. We spend so much time now preparing for aging out to occur, we'd like to see that level of investment

occur in terms of ensuring that all children, young adults in the foster care system have permanency in their lives, have connections, have belongingness so that they go out into the world after foster care with the critical supports that they absolutely need, that any of us really need.

TOM OATES [00:08:33]: Yeah and a lot of that, you know, you talked about systemic change is done at a policy level, it's done in a how we have our minds set and it's done at a practical approach level for all of these states or counties or systems that are really implementing this, you know, what we'd call the grassroots, the boots on the ground level. The Children's Bureau comes at this with a federal approach, from the overarching, you know, seat that you have in D.C. - so, what are the concrete actions that the Children's Bureau is able to take to kind of meet those goals that you just mentioned?

JERRY MILNER [00:09:08]: Well, I think overall, the overall strategy has to be one that helps us to move as a child welfare system from being an almost exclusively reactive system to one that's much more proactive in terms of strengthening the ability of parents to care for their children safely before foster care is ever necessary, before a report of child abuse and neglect ever is made to a child abuse and neglect hotline. That's a major role that I think the federal government can play, we have a unique ability to be the voice of system change, we have the ability of where we have flexibility in our funding, which is not always there, but to fund those kinds of efforts that help to move the system in that, in that general direction.

[00:10:06]: In order to try to take advantage of that unique position that we have in the federal government, for about three years now we have worked as hard as we possibly can to understand those programs that are working out there that most closely resemble the kind of proactive system that we believe will serve children and families better. The more that we learn about those strategies, the more that we shine light on those communities, those leaders, those experiences and those outcomes, the better chance that we have of making this something tangible, something real for the child welfare system as a whole. A few months ago, we issued guidance in the form of an information memorandum that reflects a lot of lessons that we've learned over the last two, three years here.

[00:11:03]: Highlighting communities that have seen that kind of success and that are able to share their strategies with others. We'll be coming forward very soon with other guidance that focuses on, as we've just talked about, treating foster care as a service to families. We also issued guidance on the importance of the voice of people with lived experience - young adults who have been a part of the child welfare system, their parents, and how we begin to incorporate their voices and their experiences into our policies, into our funding decisions, into all of our initiatives. These are things that all align, I think, to help us reimagine a child welfare system that really is family focused, that recognizes and supports the integrity of parent-child relationships and the voices of those people who know the system in ways that none of us really can understand the child welfare system.

TOM OATES [00:12:20]: I want to remind folks listening that if you go to www.childwelfare.gov and on the show notes for this episode, we're gonna put links out to the information memorandum that Jerry just mentioned, along with examples of really sharing those youth voices. So, Jerry, if anyone has ever heard you speak or has read anything of some of your statements, two words are gonna pop up and you've already said them a couple of times already - prevention and community. So, when we start talking about foster care and we start talking about the system itself we realize that, you know, child welfare, human services, the systems are all intertwined and within those communities. I know one of the areas that we tend to not think about when we first glance at, you know, trying to make foster care a support for families is the role of the legal and the judicial community as an active partner in child

welfare planning. What's being done actually kind of foster that partnership, foster that community sense between those agencies or those systems?

JERRY MILNER [00:13:35]: Well, I would say a tremendous amount is happening there. Again, for almost three years now, we have probably invested equal effort in the legal judicial community as we have more traditional child welfare, child protection agency part of the system because we know inherently that different sectors of the broader child welfare community affect the lives of children and families every single day. It's not good enough to say that a child welfare agency needs to take on the prevention mantle or the foster care as a service to families orientation without the other key players being in similarly situated in terms of our values, of our goals and what it is that we hope to get out of the child welfare system. As many weeks as not, we're out there meeting with the national organizations that represent the judiciary, the represent the attorneys who are involved in the child welfare system, whether it's for to represent children, parents, agencies, the whole court system individual judges and legal representation groups to try and advance this agenda around primary prevention and how we can reimagine the child welfare system.

[00:15:04]: One of the more tangible things that we recently did is change a very long-standing policy that we've had in the Children's Bureau that will allow states to use funds from our largest pot of child welfare money, Title IV-E, to cover the costs associated with providing high quality legal representation to children and parents in the child welfare system. We think that's one of the key ways that the voices of parents and children can be elevated in the courtroom, in legal proceedings and that their desires, their goals can be a part of the decision making process as the courts and agencies make decisions that affect their very lives. We are trying our hardest to link the necessity for high quality legal representation to many of our existing statutory tools out there, such as reasonable efforts requirements that have been on the books for many, many years. The more children and parents have a voice, the more they are adequately represented in the court system, we believe the better opportunity the courts have to make informed decisions around whether or not efforts have been made to actually prevent children from being removed from their parents and when they are removed, to make those efforts to get them reunified or just some other form of permanency on a timely, timely basis.

[00:16:41]: We're also using one of our strongest tools, which is a program improvement plan that results from our child and family services reviews that we conduct in all of the states to incorporate in a number of situations provisions for states and local agencies to ensure that children and parents have access to high quality legal representation. So, we're very excited about this work. I have to say that across the country, we've been getting an incredible reception when we make those efforts to include the judiciary, to include the legal community and it's just one of those areas where I feel like in a relatively short period of time, we've made tremendous progress.

TOM OATES [00:17:35]: And, I encourage folks to think about that as also another way to really share the voice or to have the voice being heard, you know, be it of the youth involved or the families involved into understanding and bringing them literally a seat at the table but also from that legal side where so much change or lack of change happens, is once that, you know, once that voice is shared, eyes can open up a little bit wider. So, we are, you know, embarking and, you know, we're launching this episode in conjunction with National Foster Care Month in 2020. Of course, the purpose of the National Foster Care Month website - which, folks, you can go to www.childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth, all one word - the purpose of the site is to raise awareness and to provide information about how we can support children and families who may need help. Jerry, how important is it that you're trying to get people to become more aware and actually spread the word about the initiative?

JERRY MILNER [00:18:36]: Yeah, there's a couple of things I'd probably like to hit on there. I think for us to really change our child welfare system in a radical way to be more supportive of all the things that we believe are right for children and for their parents, we have to be able to change a fundamental misperception about who those families are and what their circumstances are. Oftentimes, it's strong, preconceived notions, its value judgements we make about people who are in particular situations who are incredibly vulnerable that create barriers to us in creating a kind of system that's responsive to their needs and helping them to avoid getting even deeper into distress. So, the more we're able to put information out there to increase public awareness, I think we have more opportunity for people in the general public to be able to think much more humanely about families who need help or find themselves in difficult situations or who, quite frankly, may have made some bad decisions in their life.

[00:19:58]: So, that raising awareness, I think is fundamental. It doesn't need to be an event, it needs to be an ongoing process because we need to be reminded, quite honestly, over time that many of us, if not all of us, could find ourselves in that kind of a vulnerable situation given the right circumstances, the right set of events. So, raising awareness, keeping that forefront in all of our efforts, I think is essential. The other thing I'd just like to hit on around raising awareness is the whole notion that - we hear this from parents all the time, all the time, I hear from parents - they're afraid to ask for help. They're afraid that if they reveal their vulnerabilities and, particularly going into child protection agencies, that they are A.) at risk of possibly losing custody of their children if they reveal that they actually need help, or if they have lost their children and they're forthcoming about the need for help that that in some way may delay their ability to get their children back.

[00:21:10]: We need to change that. We need to make asking for help a sign of strength, a sign of awareness by parents themselves and make that a nonthreatening kind of situation so that they have access to critical resources that, again, any family would need in order to care for their children safely. Having a website or other ways to get that information out there to help families understand what resources are available and to try and normalize that experience of asking for help can go an awful long way in reimagining what child welfare really is all about in our country.

TOM OATES [00:21:52]: Ideally, when the system is a partner and is viewed as a partner. And folks, this kind of reminds me of a recent episode on the Information Gateway Podcast where we profiles birth parents and foster parents as mentoring teams where there was a relationship that actually was created where those misconceptions, Jerry, that you mentioned were broken down and the idea of a partnership to work together to support the family was, you know, really upheld and kind of fostered through that. So, we'll have a link to that episode, as well, on the show notes. And so, you know, Jerry, you talked, you used the word radical and we are seeing this shift across child welfare of putting more energy, resources into prevention as you mentioned, including, you know, focusing on that collaboration and we talked about legal and judicial, but there's so much collaboration among agencies, service providers and community organizations. So, that's executed at that local level within those counties or those cities or those communities - give me a sense of what the federal government is able to do to support and encourage something like that.

JERRY MILNER [00:23:01]: Well, quite a lot. I'm really happy that you ask about that because we understand incredibly clearly that the job of radically changing how children and families experience the child welfare system cannot reside within any one federal agency or within any one national organization. We have to have a common vision. We have to have a common commitment across those federal and national entities that affect the lives of kids every day and an agreement that we want to

serve them in a certain way with a certain defined set of outcomes. With that in mind, probably about a year ago we began a partnership with other federal child and family serving agencies - just as an example The Center for Disease Control, SAMHSA, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Agency, HRSA which administers a number of child and family serving services, children's medical services, Casey Family Programs from the philanthropic community and with the legal and judicial community - to begin to strategize about how we can collectively have the greatest positive impact on families while reducing the burdens that face so many of our families.

[00:24:39]: That's been and continues to be a very critical part of our work in moving our vision, our priorities for a reimagined child welfare system forward. We're looking to identify ways in which we can, if not totally blend our funding - because we all have a lot of unique statutory limitations that are imposed upon us - but, how we can coordinate that funding. How we can operate less as individual agencies with our own agendas and more as a collective that is committed to breaking down the barriers that families face every day when they're trying to access resources across the lines of the federal government. We are looking for ways that we can not only agree on a common vision and a common commitment, but how we can demonstrate that we can actually work together to create those conditions out there in communities where families can thrive, where children are free from harm. And I'm as optimistic as I can possibly be that with the reception that we have and the commitment from other national entities out there that we're gonna be able to do that. We're gonna be able to build on the strengths of some communities out there that have already, quite honestly, gone a long way down the path of prevention here and show the rest of the field that this is not just some grand idea that we have or some lofty goal, but that it actually can be a reality.

[00:26:34]: So, I really look forward to us having more conversations about how that process is moving forward. With that being said, let me go back to just some of how you framed the question there. It is entirely necessary that we do this at the federal level, but we have to do it with the idea in mind that our goal is to facilitate that collaboration, that coordination at the local level where children and families live every day, where they have the ability to access services that are so critical to their overall wellbeing. Regardless of what we do at the federal level, if it doesn't come together in those communities, I'm not optimistic that we're gonna change the experiences that children and families actually have. So, we have to work at it from both angles if we're gonna be successful in moving this forward.

TOM OATES [00:27:32]: And there are some of those examples of that community engagement, the community, that common commitment in action, so, we'll point to some of those resources on this episode's webpage, especially the folks that we know - you've talked about it, we've actually talked with them on the podcast - from San Diego, who have really linked, you know, agencies, service providers, even universities together in trying to, kind of, take a large reach in like San Diego, which, yes it's one county, but it's incredibly diverse and how they've been able to weave those partnerships together. As you're traveling across the country and interacting with those folks, boots on the ground, I'm curious to get a sense of, from the child welfare perspective, of the emerging trends and those questions and the needs that people are bringing up to you. What are you hearing as you're going around the country?

JERRY MILNER [00:28:30]: Well, as you might guess, depending upon the community and depending upon what the particular needs are, we hear different things. But, I love your reference back to San Diego and the whole LiveWell San Diego initiative out there because I think that represents one of the trends that we're beginning to see in a very prominent way and that is a real understanding around the essential need for collaboration across a lot of different entities. San Diego probably represents one of

the best examples out there of partners in the community from public, from private, from business, from all kinds of sectors in the county out there coming together with a common vision that people can live well. That they can be healthy and by the way, we can begin to reduce some of those very difficult and harmful things that happen to children and families when they are not able to live well.

[00:29:37]: So, that sense of collaboration, I think, I don't think I'm premature in saying that really is a strong trend that's emerging. How to do it is certainly one of the big questions that we get, how to do that effectively. How to overcome sometimes barriers to effective collaboration, when you get down to nuts and bolts issues like sharing data and blending policies and blending funding, but the more we can point out and highlight the places where that really has been able to happen, I think the closer we get to that is being the norm across the whole spectrum of child welfare.

[00:30:23]: Another trend - and I hope this is not surprising at all - but, just the notion of prevention as a primary way of intervening with children and families has been one of the most well-received messages that we get. I think when we talk about it, there's nearly universal agreement that that's where we need to go as a child welfare system. I think jurisdictions are struggling mightily, again, with how do we get there, how do we move from a crisis driven system that is set up and has been historically set up to respond to crisis. That's set up to wait until we get a report of child abuse and neglect before we are able to mobilize our resources - how do we move from that to a system that reaches families in a universal way before any of that becomes necessary at all?

[00:31:26]: I do think, you know, since you asked about this earlier, that there is a trend now toward helping to ensure that parents and kids have high quality legal representation. That has been a really big leap for a lot of jurisdictions and in my years of working in the field in child welfare I had the unfortunate opportunity to see parents simply not have their rights respected or even acknowledged sometimes in complex child welfare systems. We're seeing a big move to get away from that and to go to the point where parents have that opportunity. Another trend that just is incredibly uplifting to me is a trend around ensuring that parents and young adults who have been a part of the system have a voice, not only in their own situations, their own case planning, but in the system operations themselves.

[00:32:34]: I mentioned a little earlier we put out some guidance on that. The field has rallied around that. We have gotten to the point in our own work here out in the field where whenever possible, we prefer to be on the stage with parents, to be on the stage with those young adults who are part of the system so that we can give a much more holistic view of what it is that we're trying to look for in a reimagined child welfare system. As we facilitate that and as we give agency to those consumers of the child welfare system, we're seeing much, much more activity within states at the local level to help ensure that that's an institutional integrated way of doing the work. So, those are just a few of the things that I think we see, but they're incredibly encouraging. And I think the burden is on us, as well as on states and many of our national partners to help understand where those things are working well, what is it that's making them working well and how can we do our part to support the well-functioning changes in our child welfare system that we're looking for.

TOM OATES [00:33:53]: You know, you actually walked right into where I was gonna wanna wrap up about where you saw the field going in the next five to ten years and it is that kind of, like as you mentioned, I hear this common commitment and I like that phrase that common commitment that really can permeate throughout an entire community, but also when you start to take that common commitment with the families themselves and kind of bring them into the fold. And so, where that misconception not only comes from the public or can come from families involved, but also from the

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system itself and it may sound a little radical but once you start to see it in action, and then you get a sense of, you know, well I've got the vision, but how do, you know, that's point B. What's the first part of getting from point A to point B? Dr. Jerry Milner, I enjoyed this conversation and I thank you so much for being a part of this, for also being behind and helping champion National Foster Care Month. Thank you so much for being a part of this here on Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

JERRY MILNER [00:35:01]: It's a pleasure. Thank you so much.

TOM OATES [00:35:04]: A reminder to visit National Foster Care Month, the website at www.Childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth. So, if you work in foster care or your life is impacted by foster care, check out the Real-Life Stories, they're really worth looking into. It is a series of first-person accounts from professionals, families, children and youth on their challenges and life-changing experiences. There are a series of tools for organizations and others to help spread the word about National Foster Care Month, and resources to help community engagement and reunify families. Now if you head to this episode's web page – over at www.Childwelfare.gov – and this is episode number 48 – we'll have links to everything we mentioned during our conversation with Dr. Milner, including our previous episodes focused on Birth and Foster Parent mentoring teams, and the work being done in Southern California with LiveWell San Diego. We'll also share the Information Memorandum on engaging and utilizing family and youth voice in all aspects of child welfare to drive case planning and system improvement, and that includes Title IV-E Reimbursement for legal services for parents, children and youth. We'll also point you to a series of resources on engaging youth voices from the Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for States, so lots of information on this episode's web page.

[00:36:23]: Now if there's something else you're looking for – information on state laws and state statutes, contact information for child welfare-related organizations and groups, best practices, resources and reports, or anything else that may help your work improving the lives of children and families, hey, please do not hesitate to head over to www.Childwelfare.gov or reach out to our information support services team at info@childwelfare.gov. My thanks to Dr. Jerry Milner for taking the time to speak with us, and for you for being a part of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. We really appreciate your time and energy and joining us each and every month. So, for now, I'm Tom Oates – have a great day!

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:37:09]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at www.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.