

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
National Adoption Month - Engage Youth, Listen and Learn - TRANSCRIPT

Speakers: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Debbie Marker, Washington Division of Child Welfare Programs; Mike Kinney, KinnectOhio

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

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

TOM OATES [00:00:33]: Hello everyone and welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates and so glad that you're here with us. This episode goes hand-in-hand with National Adoption Month and the National Adoption Month 2020 website. You can head over to www.childwelfare.gov and visit the adoption section for outreach tools, along with resources for caseworkers, family and youth. According to the most recent Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, there were more than 125,000 children and youth in 2020 who were in foster care waiting to be adopted. And roughly 30% of those are 11 or older. Now the theme for National Adoption Month 2020 is Engage Youth, Listen and Learn and its purpose is to focus our attention on older youth seeking adoption or permanency and to make sure caseworkers are working with youth in developing permanency plans and continuously encouraging them to think long-term regarding adoption and permanency.

[00:01:37]: Now, along with all of this is the Children's Bureau's Adoption Call to Action; asking States to develop new strategies to achieve timely permanency for those children and youth in foster care who are waiting to be adopted. Now, this episode we're sharing the work that's going on in two states that have put older youth right in the middle of their permanency plans or adoption planning. Now, the State of Ohio has expanded its use of Permanency Roundtables to pilot Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables, with an emphasis on bringing youth and those close to them – their connections, “their people” as you'll hear – all to the table from the beginning. And in Washington State, youth are creatively directing their own profiles – showcasing their talents, their passions, their personalities – to show families more of who they are as whole people, not just youth seeking adoption.

[00:02:32]: Plus, Washington is working on similar methods to create family profiles for youth to learn more about those who could potentially be adoptive families. Now, you'll hear from Debbie Marker, permanency grant administrator with Washington State's Division of Child Welfare Programs. But we will start the episode with Mike Kinney, the co-founder and director of advancement for KinnectOhio - an organization delivering adoption and permanency programs and services across the state. So, we're talking about youth-led efforts to reduce the time to permanency: Engage Youth, Listen and Learn here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

[00:03:15]: Mike and Debbie, welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

MIKE KINNEY [00:03:20]: Thanks so much for having me.

DEBBIE MARKER [00:03:21]: Thanks for having me, too.

TOM OATES [00:03:23]: So, I want to start in Ohio - so, Mike, I want to first off address the kind of sense of urgency that happens statewide, because, of course, Ohio is a county-administered system, yet statewide it chose to implement the Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables. Why did that occur at such a, at a statewide level for Ohio?

MIKE KINNEY [00:03:45]: So, a couple key reasons. The first is that our children have people. So, there becomes this narrative the longer a child spends in foster care that this child has no one. And, what we've learned over the last 10, 20 years in the field is that that having no one - and those on the radio can't see me making air quotes - but, it's a result of their removal from their culture, from their community, from their kin. So, one of our programs separate from the Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables works on family finding at the front door when a child first enters care. And, the reason I bring that up is right now we're averaging 190 connections found per child during that first month when they come into care. Now, whether a child's been in foster care for two years or they just came in, if we're averaging that, that means all of our kids on average have 190 connections.

[00:04:38]: And so, with Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables, we're looking at kids who, youth who've been in care for 12 months or longer and are 12 years old or older. So, these kids have spent a significant amount of time in foster care and we have this narrative that they have no one, but what we know is there's at least 190 people that were in their lives or that existed before they came into care. And so, the answer to your question of why, why this statewide focus - and just to be clear, right now Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables are in 10 Ohio counties and we plan to double that over the next six to 12 months. So, we'll be adding 10 more counties at the direction of the state, of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, who is a very strong partner in this. But, the second answer to your question quickly is that it's not okay that where a child is born determines their likelihood of achieving permanency. So, if these connections existed and some agencies are going back and engaging the youth and saying who are your people and who do you miss and who do you love and others are not, that that's having a direct cause and effect result on whether or not a child ages out of our system without relational and legal permanency or whether they do, whether they can formalize that. And so, the state is looking at, the Kinnect is looking at how do we use this model to ensure that no matter where you were born and where you live that your voice is heard in where, in the planning efforts of your permanency work.

TOM OATES [00:06:10]: So, permanency roundtables - clearly as now you've used this as kind of this massive network of folks to recognize that network that's available to a child, a child's network - but if permanency roundtables are not new to the state. If I'm not mistaken, Ohio has been using permanency roundtables for some time, so what needed to change from how those roundtables were being executed in the past to what you're trying to do today?

MIKE KINNEY [00:06:38]: Yeah, that's a phenomenal question. So, permanency roundtables is a Casey Family Programs model and there were a few counties that had implemented from 2009-12 and then in 2012 it was a state initiative which is where the initial 10 pilot counties came from. But, what we found was the implementation, so you know, if you think of it at its simplest - the what is really important but the how often times is even more important. And so, the implementation, the lesson learned or lessons learned since 2012 was that in a county-based system, the decisions that aren't really put set in stone from a fidelity standpoint, from an accountability standpoint, from a support perspective, counties will drift over time. So, to take away all the jargon and all the language, what we found from 2012 to 2019

was the counties were drifting. And so, maybe the meeting was supposed to be held every 90 days but there were reasons it was extended. Maybe in a smaller agency you had a facilitator who was also playing the role of the scribe who was also happened to be the supervisor.

[00:07:49]: So, what's really important about this model is that it fosters new ways of thinking and system change at the same time that it addresses this individual child's need. And so, to go back to that example that I gave, if you're a facilitator who is really trying to move the group is also the supervisor of the worker, then they're ultimately trying to change their own perspective. And if they're also the scribe, then they're the ones articulating what those action steps are. So, my point is when you have limited resources and variable county philosophies, that the model itself couldn't be evaluated because there were too many variances happening. So, what needed to change - to answer your question again directly, I'll try to stop saying that phrase, you can edit this part out - is that we needed a statewide concerted effort to say how do we give new life to fidelity, how do we hold everyone accountable to the same measures but, most importantly, how do we provide the support to large metro counties, medium sized and small rural counties so that they can all implement this model successfully and get youth to the table.

TOM OATES [00:09:01]: And it, and no, we're not gonna edit that all out, everything you're saying has value to it. And, I understand completely because if somebody is wearing, you know, multiple hats then they have multiple objectives and one of those objectives is gonna win out. And so, in doing so, then an objective or a goal, you know, is gonna have to take a backseat. Now, Ohio and OhioKinnect, you guys when we were talking earlier before we were recorded, you investigated a little bit more about what else was being done across the country and I know you guys had mentioned about the work that was being done in Colorado for roundtables - what did you guys learn from Colorado's experience that helped influence your path forward?

MIKE KINNEY [00:09:48]: So, early on, we learned about Colorado's enhancement of the permanency roundtable model, which then creates one of the world's worst acronyms, which is YCPRT - doesn't really roll off the tongue - but stands for Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtable, so essentially adding the Youth-Centered in front. And, what we learned was there were counties that were doing youth-centered that were achieving three times the results of those who weren't. And if you think of it at its simplest, if I'm making a life plan for you, Tom, and I bring you in at the end after all that planning's been done, your likelihood of then following that okan is very low, right? Whereas if I bring your voice in from day one and keep you at the table, there are aspects of maybe your life plan that don't sit well, but once you can begin to understand the why and the how and what it looks like and how your voice can maybe start to influence what that planning could look like, then there's a much higher likelihood of success.

[00:10:48]: And not only that, but what we've found is not unlike other models like family group decision making or family team meetings, the more unpaid professionals at the table, the better the results. So, youth-centered is about getting the kids' people - to go back to that term, these kids have people - so, for those out there listening, if you take away nothing else from me talking, it's the next time you hear somebody say this child has no one - and Kevin Campbell said this to me - which is that one of two things is being said. Either, A, those people don't have value or B, those people don't exist. And so, it's gotta be one of those two examples and as I mentioned earlier, we know they exist, we're proving every day they exist. But somewhere along the way, it was determined that person didn't have value to this effort of keeping kids safe within permanent families and achieving wellbeing.

[00:11:43]: And so, what we do with Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables is we say to that child, to that youth, your people matter. And we need to get your people - whether it's your mom who is still struggling with substance abuse, whether it's your teacher who you had a connection with two years ago, whether it's your siblings younger and older - whoever your people are that you need to feel safe in the meeting and that can help you think about what permanency means to you, they are welcome and encouraged to come into the room. Because, what I found from my own facilitation of the meetings is that you reach far greater results when you have more non-paid people in the room than paid professionals.

TOM OATES [00:12:24]: Well, it's also pointing toward the advocacy factor of if I am a paid professional in the room and I at least have that youth who is able to provide their input on their own life's plan, what I'm able to then do is at least see how the reaction, at least have that voice in the back of my head, now let's multiply that voice by a teacher, by a relative - and like you mentioned, the larger group of quote unquote non-paid professionals, but really, advocates for that young person to say, listen, we've got their back, are you hearing them, are you hearing us. And, you kind of sense the momentum of, oh, we're actually doing this for somebody. Because, you go back to like this kid has people, this kid is a person themselves.

MIKE KINNEY [00:13:14]: Yeah, yeah. The other thing - and you're absolutely right - and the power of seeing faces, hearing emotion. Because, I think it's understated that many times the post debrief feedback we hear from the young person is I feel loved, I feel supported and so much of feeling empowered to make your own permanency plan is knowing that those around you will support that decision, that those around you will have your back when things get good bad and ugly. Because in any family, there is the good, bad and ugly. But, I wanna go back to your question, as well, and answer one more part about Colorado because they relatively recently resolved, excuse me, released some amazing evaluation results which showed that ultimately youth-centered permanency roundtables get better results. But also, when the meetings are held with regularity, the outcomes were greater and when the roles were filled correctly.

[00:14:13]: Now, I know I mentioned that already, but it's important to note that they studied that. So, when the roles are filled correctly and when the meetings are held seems like a very simple model fidelity thing for child welfare agencies, but we're busy, things are messy and fear - fear drives, from my perspective, one of the reasons why we don't hold meetings regularly. Because, I might have something going on or the family might be experiencing crisis and what I have found from direct experiences, what better place than to get them in the room and talk about how this impacts the permanency planning. Rather than saying let's put permanency on the shelf until we can address the crisis that we're experiencing right now. So, I have very few - I mean, you talk to different people in Ohio - but, there are very few, I mean one or two things on the list of reasons of why I wouldn't hold a youth-centered permanency roundtable and bring that kid and their people to the table and say hey, how does this affect, yeah, you're in residential treatment right now, so we're gonna Skype you. But, at the end of the day, you're gonna have to step down one day and hopefully one day soon and where are you going, who's gonna be there with you, right - are the kind of conversations that our kids deserve to be having. Not sitting in residential wondering am I ever gonna get out of here and if I do, will anyone ever love me again.

TOM OATES [00:15:26]: There, that's the, you know, address the symptoms versus address the root cause or address the symptoms and not address the ultimate outcome. You know, where are you going - and my analogy is are you gonna spend all your energy and time looking at where you're putting your

left and right feet or are you gonna move your head up and see where am I going instead? But, you brought up something in terms of the Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtable, YCRPT -

MIKE KINNEY [00:15:52]: Nope. Nope.

TOM OATES [00:15:55]: YCP - yes, you're right, see - Youth-Centered, it's a lot easier to say the whole thing out front. But, so you addressed it in two approaches - a structural approach and then also what do people bring out of themselves, their emotions and their energy to that. And so, I'd like to kind of address both of those. So, what did the structure have to change, the tools or you mentioned the fidelity - what did have to, what did these roundtables have to have in terms of structure for you to at least feel like you were on the path to success?

MIKE KINNEY [00:16:33]: Yeah. So, I don't love the phrase low-hanging fruit, but we ran out the gates recently or ran out the gates with some low-hanging fruits recently which was actually way more powerful and impactful, although we're all working virtually and remotely right now. But, things like taking a lot of the forms that were usually written and projected and turning them into large scale flipcharts for facilitators and lining the walls with them. Taking the strengths bombardment - we start each youth-centered meeting by going around and talking about intentional strengths of that youth as it relates to relationship development and then they take that home - creating that in a youth friendly way. And I can tell you, the number of - I mean dozens and dozens of stories I've heard about young people taking that home and hanging that on their wall. Because our kids walk around with years of labels, right, for all the things they've done and for all the trauma they've experienced. And just to see a list of all your strengths on a daily basis. So, turning a lot of those into hands-on tools, giving the facilitators portfolios with questions and processes.

[00:17:38]: I like to think of it - we have a YCPRT coach and I tell her all the time, I say you want to get to a point where your facilitators feel like NFL coaches. Where they've got their laminated sheet and they say okay, he's telling me I just want to go back to live with mom and we know that they've had these issues, here's some questions to ask, right? We want it to be - I mean, it's always adaptive - but, we want our facilitators to feel armed for any and all barriers and challenges and so, that's our goal in terms of some of those tools. But, here's one of the most challenging and the most significant changes that we've been making - and we're making right now as we speak, actually - is focusing on relational and legal. But, relational on the path toward legal.

[00:18:22]: See, for years our field has said permanency is adoption, then we said oh wait, it's not just adoption, it includes kinship and reunification. So, that's legal. But, we just talk about options with the kid. Do you want to be adopted, who do you want to be adopted by, let's talk about adoption, adoption, adoption. What I can tell you is the vast majority or YCPRT's I've participated in where the system's goal was adoption, it ends up being kinship or actually reunification. It's a different goal than what we ended up starting with, but we didn't get to that goal by saying okay, well if you don't want adoption, what about kinship - we get to that change, that shift, that youth-driven, youth-centered outcome by bringing them to the table and focusing on relationships. Questions like who gives you a sense of belonging, who are your people? Who do you trust as a parent, who's guidance do you listen to when they talk, right, when they, who holds you accountable when you screw up, right? Who are the people that claim you. And I know that might seem like an odd question to ask a kid, but it's not - who claims you, not this is my foster kid Mike, this is my brother Mike, right, that has a different feel when you're out in public. Who claims you from a legal standpoint?

[00:19:37]: So, when you focus on those questions and you do things like placement trails and ecomaps and circles of support - when you spend your time on all those things, then the legal permanency is a piece of cake, it's a piece of cake. But, we always held these meetings with fear around like, he said he didn't want to be adopted six months ago, what would we talk about in the meeting? And that, to me, is the biggest shift that we have to get away from is only talking about the legal outcome when it's the relational stuff that gets you there.

TOM OATES [00:20:07]: Yeah, the label kind of puts you in a process, the label kind of puts you in a box and there's no such thing, no boxes aren't working now. So, what kind of changes did you need to see from those involved? What was the, maybe the mindset that you needed to have change from all the people at the roundtable?

MIKE KINNEY [00:20:31]: Wow, that's a great question. I think it's everything from a microlevel to creating a safe space, you know. I think we take for granted, because we work in these sterile environments in child welfare, that not being in the room - I know this seems silly - but not being in the room when the kid comes in and the support people come in, greeting them in the hall, because it sends the signal and they're letting the kid decide, the young person decide where they're gonna sit. You know, little things like that that help them recognize we don't want a vibe that feels like you're already meeting about them and looking at all their weaknesses and then say, okay, let's address some strengths. We needed a willingness to acknowledge that what we've been doing up to this point wasn't working and then also, we needed to create more of a peer to peer network.

[00:21:16]: I think we make a big mistake in this field - you know, it's the age old if you got off a plane or drove more than a couple hundred miles, you're instantly 10% smarter - right, we needed to recognize there are tremendous, especially in a county-based system like Ohio, there are tremendous subject matter experts that are 30 miles over a county line, but you'd think it's the end of the world, never the two shall meet. So, we're creating learning communities for facilitators to work together to pick each other's brains, to share resources, to challenge each other. We haven't started this yet, but I'm very excited - we're gonna have some fidelity monitoring from peers going in and watching other facilitators and then rating them. Because, I think so much of the learning happens - right, as we learn more and more about adult learning - in the form of, you know, learn one, see one, do one. And, when you're out there mapping somebody else's fidelity and saying why did you go to the support people and not ask the worker about that - that's where the real magic happens and the change, right?

[00:22:20]: I think the other change that we, you know - and I'm gonna tell a quick story if it's okay - that we've seen is a willingness for administrators to admit that maybe work wasn't done at the beginning. So, I go back to my example of 190 connections, you know, just because time has passed, healing and recovery in particular don't always match child welfare deadlines. So, you got 12 out of 22, you got, you know, all these, 15 months in care consecutively, you got all these deadlines and then we gotta file for TPR and we gotta do all these things and then, what happens when we realize that we go back and we find an aunt or a mom or a grandfather who's been sober for five years while this kid has been languishing, bouncing around foster care and ultimately, we're leaving them isolated and lonely when we could've done that work. So, it's a willingness for administrators and leaders to go back and say, you know, fundamentally, do I still believe people can change?

[00:23:18]: And so, my story is that we had a young man who was 17 and he wanted to live with his sister. Now, his sister had aged out of care, she was 19 and a half, she had two kids under two and was living in a two-bedroom apartment. Now, on paper, that is not a good permanency plan, right? But,

what we were able to do was bring him, his foster mother, his sister, his siblings all to the table and work, it was a one-year process, where he was placed with his sister the week before Christmas. Now, I will be totally transparent with you that that placement did not stick. So, he was not able to stay with his sister long term. But what he was able to do was then affirm his commitment - so, first of all strengthen his relationship with his sister, do his own healing - and affirm his commitment with his foster mother who loved him dearly and had committed to him beyond the age of 18 or 21.

[00:24:16]: And so, we focused less on the physical and more on the relational and he left that YCPRT experience with a stronger relationship with an acknowledgment that my sister's not my mom, right? Because in his mind she can provide all those things for him and he learned that in the safety of our care, right, so he didn't age out, go move in with her and then find himself homeless, right? He was able to do that healing work, that relational work in our care. But, that required that administrator to come to the table for six months, it required a parole officer - because this young man had a long criminal history, or at least a decent criminal history, I shouldn't have said long - a parole officer, all these people to come to the table and talk about their fears. And so, to answer your question bluntly and directly, what we needed to see as a change was not just forms and processes, we needed a commitment to say we have to be willing to look at this differently if we want to get different results.

TOM OATES [00:25:15]: Let me ask you this, how many other opportunities had either the administrators or parole officers or maybe it's juvenile justice or it's mental health or it's education - whoever those other partners are in each individual case - how many times did they actually get together in the room for conversations?

MIKE KINNEY [00:25:36]: They don't. It's a spoke and hub system. We've got a worker who is exhausted, running around, responsible for all, carrying the weight of the world of these children who has to convey each and every conversation, right - and all of us have played telephone - and so you can only imagine how convoluted and complicated things get when that many partners to have to update. And so, this allows that to be streamlined, but you gotta be willing to have those conversations openly and transparently in front of the young person. So, no, there's no other opportunity for that outside of this type of work.

TOM OATES [00:26:12]: Okay. And, that's also where the young person becomes a person as opposed to a number, a case file, you know, this is what we're dealing with here, we're talking about human services, we're talking about people. And once you start to look at people - be it the connections, you know, you talked about connections with value - these are people with value. So, this is tough. This isn't, it's new or it can be new to people or it's different - how are you countering the barriers or the pushback both from, you know, from the professionals and from the non-professionals that are involved in the Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables?

MIKE KINNEY [00:26:55]: Yeah, so, first of all, we did not come up with the phrase at all, but we embrace it, which is "unpacking the no". We are constantly creating unpackers and so, this idea of the change process and identifying where are they, you know, if it's a firm hard no, okay, well, let's just maybe work a different process. If it's just some surface level, I'm worried about these few things. To go back to that previous example really quickly as it relates to change - that PO was adamantly against, that parole officer was adamantly against that placement with that sister and I will never, never forget the look on his face when he saw the young man and his sister and the love they had and the bond they had and his willingness to engage because it brought back the humanity, it made them people. But also, you know, his no went from this is unsafe to it's not gonna be as unsafe as I thought.

[00:27:51]: So, watching him go through that cycle of recognizing and then, along the way - not trying to unpack the no all at once - letting him move on a sliding scale from where he was at a one to a five over the course of four or five months and working a process. Because what it turned out to be in that situation was he was worried primarily about the educational continuity because this young man was in a specialized program. So, we ended up going to that principal and getting permission for him, even though he was going to be living outside the jurisdiction to still remain in the school. So, then that brings on the transportation challenge. SO, my point is unpacking the no is something you hear, but the skill set of doing it, of hearing somebody say no and then taking that in and sitting with it and not trying to change it immediately, that's a huge learning curve for people who are constantly in go mode, right? They're on an island of I gotta move, I gotta make action, I gotta do it. But, sitting with that no and acknowledging that it has validity sometimes. So, he wasn't wrong, right, it was a risky situation, but how do we address that risk?

[00:28:58]: I think the other thing - and you mentioned it earlier - is creating an army of advocates and champions. So, when it's, you're in a room and you hear things like our judge is never gonna go for that - okay, well let's talk about how you could potentially bring a plan to that judge that might help them be a little bit less worried. And, I will say workers, supervisors and administrators often struggle with how to create that plan. So, we're helping them do their own advocacy whether it's with teachers or with foster care agencies - I mean, you name it, right - the barriers take all kinds of forms. I mean, let's be really honest here - as a field, we're talking about what's a good enough family. I mean, that's something I learned early on in this YCPRT work from an amazing woman in Casey Family Programs who said it's our job to figure out what's a good enough family. And when you make your peace with that, you realize that people from different elements of our culture and society are gonna have different definitions. And so, how do we bring them to the table and meet the needs of these families and kids while also acknowledging the complexities of all those cultural influences.

[00:30:05]: The second part around how do we address resistance from family and youth - I'll be really succinct on this answer which is three things. Honesty, consistency and commitment. So, kids and families and supports and all those people that we talk about bringing to the table, the unpaid professionals, they respond best to honesty, consistency and commitment. When those things start to waiver, they know it, right. I heard a family member once say I'm well aware when I enter a room and a decision's already been made about my life. And, the power behind that, around knowing how these systems work, we've already come to a conclusion and you're just here for token perspective versus that honest engagement, that consistent voice as a driver and the commitment to say we don't know what the outcomes gonna be but we know that we'll get to a better one when you're at the table and you're driving.

TOM OATES [00:31:02]: Mike, that's powerful. And it's pleasing to hear the mental shift approaching, as well, because if you've got, if you've got somebody's heart and somebody's mind into it, then that structure gets support. You know, where somebody's gonna say, no I need to be in this meeting and I need to have this role and I know that there's something to it. So, that's where the structure gets support from there. So, I appreciate you sharing so much. And now, I kind of want to shift out and move out west to Washington State and bring in Debbie Marker about what Washington's doing with the youth directed recruitment plans that they've instituted. So, Debbie, again, welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

DEBBIE MARKER [00:31:47]: Thank you.

TOM OATES [00:31:48]: So, let's talk about the components first. When you talk about a youth-directed recruitment plan, who are youth involved in their planning?

DEBBIE MARKER [00:31:58]: Well, first I want to say, I love listening to Mike, we love what Ohio's doing and it sounds like it really intersects well with what Washington's trying to do. We, I think around 2016, we realized that we wanted to bring youth more involved in their own recruitment. So, we had profiles on our exchange that were written by workers or possibly caregivers who wrote up their description of the youth and we met with our contracted provider which is Northwest Resource Associates and said can we do something different where this is led by youth. And, we did. We started what they called in-depth profiles, I call them youth-directed profiles, where essentially, they hired a worker that goes out and meets with youth and says what would you like, how would you like to present yourself to families. Their voice matters, the youth voice matters and that's what we wanted to show families to inspire them to maybe come forward and inquire on youth and possibly provide some type of permanency, be it adoption or another form of permanency.

[00:33:14]: And so, this collaboration that we started in 2016 with youth has really taken off. We're, we've expanded it to, we're trying to include all youth 13 and older right now who want to develop in their own way some sort of showcase of themselves to families. And, it could be a podcast, it could be that they do a cooking show. So, right now if you go on our exchange website - which is nwae.org - and you look, there is a profile of Maya and it's making churros with Mya that she loves to cook and this is how she wanted to present herself to families. We've had others, we had a ventriloquist act, a youth who was very into ventriloquism, we had another youth talk about gaming. We've had poetry reading, songs, singing - just all sorts of different youth-directed profiles that are now on our exchange that really showcase youth and who they are from them. And that's what we wanted to do.

TOM OATES [00:34:22]: So, with the in-depth profiles - and again, I'll, we'll make sure that folks have a link to nwae.org on the show notes for this episode - when you've got all of these various elements, clearly we're talking about being able to technically support this and having the staff to also support this. So, how are all of these efforts - those videos, I guess maintaining a website - how are those funded?

DEBBIE MARKER [00:34:51]: So, we've had an ongoing contract for our exchange with Northwest Resource Associates I guess for several years. And, what we did is we looked at that contract and we said we're gonna shift some things around to make this more youth-directed, we're gonna see how this works. So, back in 2016, we shifted funding to, I think we started out with like maybe 10 youth-directed profiles and it, we like loved it so much that now we try to do, I believe it's 30, it's funded for 30 a year currently. Another piece that we did just kind of off of that is in 2017, the following year, instead of having what's called Family Fest which is where youth show up, kind of - I mean there's a movie that kind of showcased this - youth show up and families walk around, they look at youth, they interact with youth and then families decide oh, I think I'd like to learn more about this youth or that little kid or whoever it is.

[00:35:58]: In our state, in November of 2017, we did what we called Reverse Matching Event which is where youth, we set up a facility it was in our paid center, we provided pizza and our paid tokens and we had stations set up with family profiles with family pictures, write ups on families and youth went with a support person and they picked families that they felt like they might want to live with. And, eight youth participated, so it was very much on a small scale and of those, six chose homes that they

eventually ended up living in. And so, we considered that a huge success and so that's something else we're looking at moving towards in our state, but again, it's youth-directed.

TOM OATES [00:36:45]: Yeah, you mentioned the movie recently or somewhat recently - Instant Family -

DEBBIE MARKER [00:36:51]: Thank you, couldn't think of the name.

TOM OATES [00:36:53]: Yeah. And, it was actually, I remember a similar clip of exactly what you talked about - a fair, so to speak, out in the open where families and some of the youth are there and can interact and kind of meet and greet. There's a specific scene in that movie that involves a situation like that. So, how - you were talking about engaging with youth and young people and there's just so much that they are dealing with not only trying to navigate a system but also just trying to be young people in our world today - how are youth embracing this or how are they approaching this?

DEBBIE MARKER [00:37:37]: So, we, so youth love this when they're approached by the recruiters and are talked about doing their own profiles, their creativity is just incredible to see the different ideas that they have and they love being able to direct their own whatever it is that they choose to share. So, I don't always want to say video, because like I said, sometimes it's a story that they write or it's very unique for each youth and that's what's fantastic about it. It's required a lot of shifting though, in terms of like with workers and how their thoughts are. They're used to, first of all if a youth says no, they're not interested, then they kind of let that go and they move on and we've come back to say let's have conversations with youth to talk about what this might mean.

[00:38:34]: It's really scary for us to approach a youth and say hey, do you want a permanent family when they don't know anyone that they're connected to or have identified recently or, they've never been asked historically about anybody that they're connected with. And so, just to be approached with this question do you want to be adopted tends to already give you the answer of no. And so, we're really trying to reeducate staff with how to have conversations - I mean, Mike mentioned unpacking the no, we do that a lot, not just with having, helping staff learn how to talk with youth, but us helping, learning to talk to staff about the fact that they don't need to label youth and recruitment's a very fluid process, so where youth is now may not be where youth is next month or six months or a year from now and how to continually come back to that because we don't want youth raised in our system, right, we're a foster care temporary system, we want to find their connection and move them to it.

TOM OATES [00:39:38]: When you're dealing with professional, with your staff, how difficult is it to kind of make that separation between you know, executing the process of a system versus maybe being patient and taking that step back and just working with this young person, because you had mentioned just the question of do you wanna be adopted and I ask folks to imagine being asked that question and it's pretty daunting when you think about your entire future and you think about where you're going to live and who is going to be around, that's a daunting question. So, when you are working with staff, how difficult or maybe how easy has it been to kind of approach things from a different mentality or approach things with not as much an adherence to the process and the process only, but adherence to the process with a connection and an idea of working with something that's just so fluid as each individual young person.

DEBBIE MARKER [00:40:39]: So, it is you know, there's a lot of things to take into account. So, all of our staff I believe genuinely want to do their best practice, want to do their best work. But, as Mike said

when you mentioned the Ohio workers, our workers are overwhelmed, they're reacting a lot, I mean we have a shortage of placement homes, especially for older, difficult to place youth who might be going through some different issues. So, they spend a lot of time reacting and they don't feel like they have the time to be proactive and this is of course, having conversations with youth, taking a breath and taking a step back and, like, helping a youth work through a transition, that takes time and patience. And, our staff, unfortunately, are burdened with this.

[00:41:25]: So, what we've tried to do - and we actually are using some of our grant funds to do this - is bringing our contractor in to help support workers in having these conversations. So, Washington State applied for a child strengthening, a strengthening child welfare systems grant, which we received. We call it the Child Permanency from Day One Grant and the whole grant is about strategies to look at being all-inclusive, to engaging all members of the family, parents, youth from the beginning of a case so that they have a voice in their case plan. And, also to address barriers that are inhibiting timeliness to permanency. And, as Mike said, it's not just, it is in a sense legal, what the legal definitions of permanency are, which is, you know, reunification or an alternative - either adoptions or in Washington State we call it guardianship, it's kinship care guardianship.

[00:42:22]: But, it's finding those connections and moving those youth through to some sort of permanent placement that is not this unstable temporary foster care placement that we have now. And so, we're able to use those funds to have our contractor support workers for having those conversations. And the benefit of that is that workers are being modeled how to have those conversations. So, that's always what we've found is that workers, you can give someone training and then they go off and they do 50 million other things and they're supposed to come back - here's the situation is now it's been two years since I took that training I had once had to know and I have no idea, right, how to, what I'm supposed to say or how I get through this difficult conversation. So, by watching someone have those conversations and seeing how to be inclusive and modeling, letting the youth kind of direct the plan instead being kind of the force behind the plan, we're showing workers how to have those conversations and how to do that work and that's going to be really helpful, we believe, in the future, also.

TOM OATES [00:43:33]: Based on the first few years, what are you seeing, what are they big overall changes and shifts that you're seeing?

DEBBIE MARKER [00:43:41]: So, the grant has just finished it's planning stage, we're just now into implementation. What I can tell you that we're seeing is lots of excitement from the field. So, we've reached out to workers, they know that this is happening and they keep emailing me with when? We have youth involved in the grant planning. They like that they have involvement, I think that they felt acted upon and our whole goal is that they are a part of the action, right, I think Mike said it, that if you are involved in planning something, you have more of a commitment, right to seeing that, following through with pieces of that instead of being told this is what you're gonna do.

[00:44:23]: Our biggest piece with this is that we're really working with workers on having youth not just in recruitment, that any youth that needs a placement helping them to make decisions about where they want to go. A part of that is that we're creating a family resource website that workers can get on with a youth and look at families and read descriptions - we'd like families to start videotaping, too, because obviously, this works really well, we think. And have workers and youth look at these families and have youth say hey, this is a family I think might fit me and that I'd like to maybe go to. Instead of

like, that opposite way, so we're trying to expand that whole process to allow a youth to have more of a voice in their case planning around placement and decision making.

TOM OATES [00:45:16]: And when do you see that, that family site being set up? When do you hope, you know, with fingers crossed that that could go live?

DEBBIE MARKER [00:45:25]: So, the family site is a site that we currently have that we really don't have many families on and so, right now, the contract has been drafted -we're waiting for it to be executed. I'm gonna guess it's gonna start hopefully no later than September of this year. And so, we will then, immediately the next site is kind of more developed, we will up and running have workers start to use that with youth. So, we see that happening in just a few months, we're excited about it.

TOM OATES [00:45:56]: And folks, what I'm gonna do is once that site is at a place where Debbie feels like it's ready, I'm gonna make sure we have a link to that on the show notes here for this episode. And finally, Debbie, I'm curious when, you know, you mentioned that youth are willing to participate in this and demonstrate that creativity in sharing themselves - are you seeing a difference amongst age groups for who is more involved or who is more engaged or apt to be engaged amongst the youth in your care?

DEBBIE MARKER [00:46:36]: Well, that's a great question, Tom. We started with in the contract, our contractor wanted to just start with youth 13 and older based on, kind of, their maturity level and their ability to articulate, kind of, their needs and to understand more of what was going on and what we realized was that we really put ourselves in a box. There are youth younger than that and so, we are just now opening that up to youth nine and older to have them develop and have help developing, kind of, their own profiles. The best example I can tell you about how youth feel about it is - I wanted to throw in an example myself - and this is of a youth who is actually in a group care setting. Now, I'm not sure if this is across the United States what everybody's seeing, but in Washington State, I think our workers are so overwhelmed that they're kind of starting to see if a youth is in group care, no one is probably gonna want to adopt them and they're just kind of left to wait until they get out of group care and then maybe we'll look at start recruiting for them then.

[00:47:43]: In this case, this youth had a written profile on our exchange that a family saw but decided they weren't sure if they really wanted to make an inquiry or not. And then, the worker for this youth while he was in group care said you know, you're gonna do, we want to try this in-depth profile for him, they talked to him about it. He said I want to do it, I want to do it. His profile, he actually interviewed himself - he's a talker, he's hilarious - and so, he interviewed, it was like a picture of him with a microphone talking to himself answering the questions and it was great and that was posted and that same family that had read his profile saw the video and were like wow, we think he would really fit in with our family. So, they made an inquiry and instead of giving the inquiry to the worker, the inquiry went to the youth and the worker said to the youth do you wanna call this family? And he said yeah, you know, I'm not sure the family has six kids, I don't know that I want siblings.

[00:48:45]: And so, he called the family himself from the group home and he talked to them for over an hour and at the end of that conversation, he asked them if he could call them again because they were on his list of considerations for families he might want to live with. Anyways, he did call them back, he eventually met them at a Starbucks, all six kids, loved the family, felt that it was the family for him, they loved him and he was adopted in March of this year. So, that's like, he exemplifies like what we're trying to do with this process and how it works. And, he's not the only youth that this has happened with, but he's just a great example, I think, especially because he was in group care and that whole kind of

stereotype around kids in group care just, you know, I just loved that he was able to talk about that and still move forward.

TOM OATES [00:49:37]: That's just another fabulous story, Debbie, thank you so much, a demonstration of how this works and again, it gets back to creating connections, be it at the Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtable or diving deeper beyond what a written profile or a case file may demonstrate. So, I truly, truly want to thank you guys both, Mike Kinney and Debbie Marker for helping us and as we launch these setting up for National Adoption Month of the great example of engaging youth and listening and learning. So, thank you guys so much for sharing your stories and sharing your work and being a part of us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

MIKE KINNEY [00:50:23]: Thanks again for having us.

DEBBIE MARKER [00:50:24]: Thank you.

[00:50:27]: Again, I want to thank Mike Kinney and Debbie Marker for their time. Now, if you head over to Childwelfare.gov and search our podcasts, you'll find this episode's page where we have posted links to National Adoption Month 2020, also Child Welfare Information Gateway's web sections focused specifically Engaging and Involving Youth and Eliminating Barriers Toward Achieving Permanency. You can also find links specific to the Children's Bureau's Adoption Call to Action, along with the Northwest Adoption Exchange that Debbie discussed, and a report from Colorado's Permanency Roundtable Program that Mike and KinnectOhio used to help shape how Youth's Permanency Roundtables would be used in Ohio. And again, you can find all of that at childwelfare.gov when you search our podcast for this episode's page. You'll also find links to AdoptUSKids, who along with Information Gateway, are partners with the Children's Bureau for National Adoption Month.

[00:51:25]: So again, thanks to Mike Kinney from KinnectOhio and Debbie Marker from Washington State's Division of Child Welfare Programs for their time and their energy to join us on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. And of course, my thanks to you for being a part of this growing community where we share the insight, perspective, and innovations improving child welfare practice and strengthening families and protecting children. I'm Tom Oates – have a great day!

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:51:54]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.