

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast  
Reimagining Child Welfare – Oregon’s Vision for Transformation TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Rebecca Jones Gaston, Oregon Department of Human Services

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

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

**TOM OATES** [00:00:31]: There's clearly been a drive to change how child welfare works. Whether we're calling it transformation, re-imagining, or dismantling, the general goal centered around becoming a more family-centered system, altering or at least reviewing the priorities that our tools and processes are built to support and to evolve child welfare into more of a prevention or proactive system instead of a reactive system - along the way, addressing racial inequities and shifting toward reunification and family support and away from removal - are gaining worthy traction. Now we've seen some legislation with the Family First Prevention Services Act, along with new initiatives and collaboration efforts. But when it comes to implementing an agency's change, what does this exactly look like and how will agencies execute that change? Well, thanks for joining this episode of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, Tom Oates here and glad you've taken the time to listen and you can subscribe to the Information Gateway Podcast on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher and SoundCloud. We appreciate the five-star reviews, keep them coming, and so happy that so many more are joining this community.

[00:01:51]: Now, today we get to dive into one state’s journey for change. Oregon's Department of Human Services has publicly documented its vision to transform its Child Welfare Division, including specific guiding principles, strategies, and measurable outcomes. Now you can read the vision on Oregon's Department of Human Services website, we’ll have that link on this episode’s webpage over at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov), just search podcasts for this episode’s page. Okay, now describing the journey which includes each of the guiding principles, the specific intention within the vision for transforming and dismantling the systemic racism that include within the offices of the division and the children and families being served, along with what all of this transformation means for partners is Rebecca Jones Gaston. She’s the child welfare director within the Oregon Department of Human Services. It is a frank and honest conversation about where we currently stand, how change must happen within all aspects of the system, and why some of the most important questions we ask are the ones we ask ourselves.

[00:03:04]: Rebecca Jones Gaston, thank you so much for joining us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:03:11]: Thanks for having me, Tom.

**TOM OATES** [00:03:12]: Appreciate you guys spending the time to join us here, specifically because the vision of transformation, while there are a number of states and jurisdictions that are embarking on similar journeys - where I want to start with, with you is what you've documented here. And so, I'm going to, I'm going to read a passage from the beginning of the document, and I'd love to get your take

on it. Quote - It centers equity and diversity in that all we do and recognizes that the child welfare system has done significant harm to communities of color, tribal nations, and other marginalized communities, and is committed to doing no further harm. We recognize that white supremacy and systemic racism are deeply embedded in the history, fabric and institutions of our country, including child welfare systems - unquote. So, I need to ask, why was it so important to state this? It's been under conversation, it's been recognized. You're not going to find tremendous argument against it. But why was it important to state this?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:04:22]: Yeah. Thank you for the question. And there was absolutely intentionality in including this very clearly stated, really center core of our value system. And what we're trying to move towards is that we've known for a long time about systemic racism in our systems. And we haven't quite been able to end it and, and do something different. And so, this really keeps it at the forefront and signals that every decision that we make, everything that we're thinking about in change and transformation has to be to this end, where we end up with a system that absolutely dismantles and in fact eliminates and possibly building up another, another system that doesn't include it at all. And so, it really is intended to just be an intentional reminder and a touchstone as we're making decisions, as we're using this as our guide that we've got to actually not just fall back on kind of what we know. Because what we know is absolutely embedded in the systemic racism that exists in child welfare and across our other systems.

**TOM OATES** [00:05:47]: Thank you for, I mean, it's documenting. It's stating what we know, but also stating where you want to build from and what must change. Part of the introduction uses the term self-determination and self-determination regarding child welfare, communities of color - can you describe what self-determination means and what supporting self-determination looks like?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:06:13]: Yes. So, self-determination is in some ways, self-explanatory. It is an individual being able to guide and drive the decisions and actions that need to happen. And we have, as systems, been pretty consistent in helping drive that for, for families and communities that we're providing intervention or working with where we come in with the, with the action, the strategy, the change that needs to happen. And so, the self-determination really is, again, saying that any change that we do has to be driven by the communities, by the individuals that we ultimately are wanting to partner with to transform our system and ultimately partner with in the way that they need us and want us to.

**TOM OATES** [00:07:09]: You, you mentioned partnership and it's, and it just kind of leads me right into the next portion. First off, giving control has a lot to do with self-determination and where that comes from. And looking at not only your partners, but you know, your clients, your staff, and that sort of thing. But as we, as I get back to, to partners - not everybody is on the exact same aligned journey. And so, as Oregon makes its shift forward, how are you re-imagining your current partners or future partners as they go on their journey in and then support you in yours.

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:07:50]: Yeah, and I think, you know, the thing about partnership is there has to be some shared or mutual agreement on what we're working on together. It doesn't mean that we always agree. It doesn't mean that we're always necessarily headed in the right direction or, or land on the same decision. But I think what partnership means, it's a relationship, it's the ability to be able to talk with each other, problem-solve together and make some decisions that are informed by the various perspectives that we all bring to the table. And why it's important is that child welfare agency can't do our work by itself. Our partners, other agencies can't do their work by themselves. And ultimately, our shared goal really is the service to families, children, communities. And so, being able to start there with

the core. And bringing folks along is, is, has been an important part of the work that we've been doing over this last year. And part of that is being able to clearly state what our values are, what our beliefs are, and what our vision is for change. And then working through that with our partners of what does this look like? How might this change the dynamic of our relationship? Where are our gaps and being able to talk about is, is that a gap that you can fill? We all have this shared role in the systemic structure that we're trying to dismantle and build differently. And so, it's, sometimes it's education about the impacts that we're having. And, I guess I would say is there, there is a hope that those that have been partnering with us will buy in, adopt these values, incorporate them into their value systems and the way that they're working along with us on behalf of children and families. And what I think we clearly recognize is there's probably some partners that are out there that we haven't engaged with historically, that we've actually got to go and sit down and talk about and engage and try and bring in this partnership. And that will, that will inform really the direction that we're going, I think, and build a broader network of supports for serving communities.

**TOM OATES** [00:10:26]: I'm curious to what those conversations can look like, you know, when you open up the door and say, hey, maybe there's an idea of no parameters or help us out as we move forward, what do you see as a potential partner or somebody coming in from out of the blue or a different environment. But if we could focus a little bit on - especially Oregon up in the Pacific Northwest - how your tribal partners are viewing this? How are they working specifically with historical trauma that they have been through and, and where you are looking to go and, frankly, improve from.

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:11:08]: Yeah. And, and those sometimes are really tough discussions because they're our partners, but we also have a nation-to-nation relationship with them and some obligation on our part about how we're upholding our responsibilities in that relationship and, frankly, as systems we haven't. And so, I think it's being able to be transparent about where we know we've fallen short. Here in Oregon, in some ways we have the opportunity to embody a new way, a new way of working together with the passage of our own Oregon legislation that is, mirrors in many ways the Federal Indian Child Welfare Act. And so, it's an opportunity for us to actually go and look at how are we engaging with our tribal nations. How are we living up to our expectation and responsibilities for making sure that we're doing everything that we can to help maintain connection for tribal children with their tribal nations and communities and working in partnership in trying to find solutions to have that happen. That also comes in commitments to looking for ways that we're also putting some money on the table in support of that.

[00:12:30]: And, and it doesn't necessarily always fit nicely into the bucket frameworks that exist. But it's always thinking about, is there opportunity for us to, to invest in partnership with our tribal nations to build prevention supports and services that are really going to be culturally specific to what their communities need. To actually sitting down in this Family First conversation and talking about what does a Family First prevention plan need to look like in service to your communities? And then thinking about both from the standpoint of what do we incorporate and how can we incorporate that into our state plan, but also then our own advocacy in those conversations about where the existing regulations, policies, practices at state and federal levels might actually be barriers to that and wanting to champion, again, really, what I think I, is our responsibility to make sure that there's pathways for our tribal nations to be able to have the resources and supports that they need and supporting their communities. But have it be driven by them in identifying what that is, what it looks like and what is it that they need.

**TOM OATES** [00:13:49]: Having your partners, whether they'd be tribal or not, or folks who are alumni from foster care, for example, having them - there's a difference between being a seat at the table and

maybe helping build the table and letting them help you look at things through their lens. And then that's what really weaving either lived experience or, or somebody the diverse nature that personally, I don't see, that personally you may not see, but together we can see with your help. It's a, it's a little bit different than just saying we're investing. Because that, just like you mentioned, put money at it, but we've decided it's going to be this program, or decided something already, so, here. Now, thank us. And this is a, this is clearly a way to say, let's start from the beginning if we're going to have partners. That's what partnership looks like.

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:14:45]: Yeah, and in many ways it's about us as the agency letting go of power. And I know sometimes we talk about sharing power, but in many cases, it might just be us letting go of it altogether and really just being a partner in the work and the conversation, but that the power sits with be it Tribal Nations or the communities that we are working with. And that, that's scary for some. And, and when we get moving on our very busy days, sometimes easy to forget because we slip back into old habits. But I think for me, what has been our exercise over this last year with this vision for transformation has been being open to folks calling us on that and then changing our behavior and even calling ourselves on it. And saying, hold up, we don't have, we don't have the right folks at the table to make this decision and being able to slow down and take some time to make sure that that happens.

**TOM OATES** [00:15:52]: Yeah, not relying on your own confidence as being I must be the smartest person in the room because I'm the only person in the room.

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:16:00]: Well, and we're creatures of habit.

**TOM OATES** [00:16:01]: Yeah. And it's a phrase I say with some of my friends and we ask ourselves - well, are you right or are you sure? We're sure we're right. Well, have you actually asked the folks who are closest to the information, who are closest to where the impacts are actually happening and they can tell you things differently, so. You had mentioned, you know, this has been more than a year and as we are really deep into 2021, we can't have a conversation without reflecting on the pandemic. So, I'm curious to when this started and the pandemic hit and where you are now, how did the pandemic influence the vision for transformation?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:16:46]: Yes. So, I came to Oregon just at the end of 2019, oblivious to what was ahead - and in many ways that was a blessing. And, you know, really knew that it's important to, to have a north star shining, a guiding light or something that you're working towards. And so, really spent a lot of time just listening to people and what they talked about, what their hopes were for, for serving children and families and for our child welfare system and for our partnerships. And then when the pandemic hit, we quickly had to move into really rapid, rapid decision-making with ever-changing information and no one involved in the decision-making ever had having gone through what we were being faced with. And it became that much more clear that it was really important that we had a shared understanding about where we were trying to go long-term. And that we needed to look at any of the decisions that we were making in that context so that we didn't make this string of kind of quick decisions in the moment that took us, kind of left from heading in the direction that we're wanting to go. Some, some of them may have ended up having to take us in a slightly different direction just based on the nature of the, the crises by being aware of it. And then thinking about how do we, what's our plan for rolling it back and being able to, to get us headed on the right path again.

[00:18:32]: I think the other thing, in many ways - and it's hard to say whether or not how this would have played out outside of the pandemic because I don't have that experience - but the moving into a

virtual space in many ways created some opportunity for more frequent engagement with our partners and even workforce from the standpoint of, instead of having to drive across this huge state of Oregon to meet with folks in eastern Oregon or Southern Oregon we were able to have these virtual space meetings and a year and a half in its kinda like, oh yeah, that's nothing new, but it was a new, it was really a new undertaking for us. So, we actually quickly increased our connections with our partners and our communities and went from what used to be quarterly face-to-face meetings to we were meeting monthly with a lot of our groups. So, our parent groups, our young people, our foster families, our workforce, our provider communities. Really talking about both updates, what's going on? Where are we in this crisis? But also talking about, we need, we want to build this sufficient for transformation. What do we believe we want to see for children and families and communities? And being able to craft that. And, and actually spent much of the pandemic actually gathering that information and then putting it on paper and actualizing it while we were talking about it. And, and I think for me that's one of the things I'm really proud we were able to do. Even in this kind of state of crisis and unknown, was really be able to craft what it is that is going to be our framework as we're moving forward.

**TOM OATES** [00:20:23]: We are separate, but the connectivity of, or should I say the convenience of tech, of connectivity has helped to where those quarterly meetings that may have been four or six hours that took people all day - and in fact, was a longer day if you were driving back and forth - now it's a two-hour block and when I'm done I've got other things, but I'm able to dive in and contribute and maybe even bring on more contributors because the cost has helped. And so, it allows us to, it allows us again to get a quicker check on if we're right or if we're sure, right?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:21:00]: Yeah.

**TOM OATES** [00:21:01]: So, there are three guiding principles to the vision of transformation. And I wouldn't mind briefly just kinda going over some of these if, if that's okay. The first one, supporting families and promoting prevention. This deals a lot with processes and procedures, things like response timeline. You know, can you explain a little bit more about the internal shifts and changes that you're hoping to implement?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:21:28]: Yeah. Here in Oregon, our primary intervention for children and families has been foster care. And so, recognizing absolutely the impact of even just having child protection become engaged in doing an assessment or an investigation is traumatic for, for families and for children. And then making, I think, one of the most traumatic decisions for families is having to make a decision to separate them. And sometimes it's necessary. But that has really only been the only lever of change or intervention that we've had. And we, we want our impact to be different. We want to minimize the trauma that's experienced by our system on families and communities. And so, that means we've gotta shift. And so family preservation, not a new concept, but that's what we're building. We're building the infrastructure and mechanisms to support us being able to grow, how we're able to help children stay at home safely with their families, work through what the, what the concerns and issues were together, and not have the trauma of separation, and ultimately be able to not have to have foster care be involved at all. And, it is a shift and I think it's one that is supported in many ways by some of the change at the federal level with the Family First Prevention Services Act. That finally, at long last acknowledges that the largest funding stream for child welfare is only been funding out-of-home care.

[00:23:15]: And so it's slowly shifting. There's still a journey in this process, but what it does is it's, it's a boost to our conversation to say, hey, we're starting to make this shift and here in Oregon, we want to actually make the shift really intentionally and try to utilize foster care less and less, and be able to have

the ability to have supports and services for, for children and families that might be in crisis, that might need some support and intervention, some coaching and supports. And then I think the other piece of it is, is in working with our other systems and communities long before anyone gets to a point where they call a Child Abuse Hotline. Because ultimately, we would love for families to get what they need and we don't need to be involved at all because we are a response system. If we're only focused on what do we do in response to a concern about maltreatment, then I think we're missing the mark because ultimately, we don't want the maltreatment to happen at all. And that's in a space that precedes the child welfare agency in many ways. And that to me, is where the ability to build partnerships across agencies and with communities is part of our responsibility is, it may not be within our scope of work, but let's partner, set the table, bring folks and really imagine together how we create a network of supports and systems that the community and families and children are saying they need in times of crisis, that then means that there's no need to call and report concerns about abuse or neglect. And thinking about how we reinvest our resources.

**TOM OATES** [00:25:11]: This is part of that also convincing these other partners and agencies what the child welfare system can and can't do. Because you talked about all the processes and if like every question that's asked or every action that's made leads to a remove or don't remove situation, then that's clearly what the system is intended to do, it's to decide do we remove or not. And that's clearly where you're, where you're shifting away. But when it comes to all of those other partners, if they only look at, hey, we've got to call protective services. They've already made that decision that that's who we call for a remove or don't remove decision. Where they may not have to do the action, but they know who to call. So, is there a point of you've kind of got to really work with your partners to change their minds on who you are as well?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:26:07]: Yes, absolutely. I think, you know, child welfare has become in many ways the supposedly kinda crystal ball holder that is going to be able to, well, if children might be harmed one day or something has happened or, you know, all of the things. And it is absolutely, I think, outside of our, out of our scope. But as partners, so, in those conversations, it's talking about that. But I think the other piece that has been important in our conversations and work has been what's the impact, where people understand what the impact is to a child, to a family, to a community when they come to child welfare. And we have to talk about race. We have to talk about the systemic pieces that we already know, the disproportionality starts at the decision that a call needs to make. And there's lots of reasons for that. And I don't know if we have enough time to go into that, Tom. But, but it starts a domino effect because then throughout then the decision-making, the assessments, all those sort of things, because our system has been built with the systemic racism structures, is that there's lots of judgment and decision, personal bias, all those sort of things that go into our decision-making that further perpetuates the issue. And, you know, many systems - Oregon's not alone - of where, what I'm afraid of, is that once you become a part of child welfare, there's some predictability by race of what your outcome is going to be. And so, we're trying to in some ways reverse engineer and get to the spaces where we, let's talk about what, what are the concerns? I absolutely believe people are well-intended in their concern about getting families and children attention and supports and resources.

[00:28:18]: I think the go-to has historically been it's child welfare and it's for child welfare to figure out when in fact, it often times isn't. And again, I don't think Oregon's alone in this where most of our calls to the hotline don't actually get then screened in for an assessment. And then those that do, don't end up necessarily with a founded or placement into foster care. And so, you think about that whole spectrum of then possible crisis or in need of a family and a child that isn't going to get the one thing child welfare has to offer because it doesn't rise to that level. But then they're still not getting what they

need, right? And so that really is where we are in this work with our partners about the stuff that's needed by families and children before the intervention of foster care. And there's opportunities in that. And I think we've, we've gotten some really good responses from our partners in really thinking about how do they incorporate this into their work? Because I think, you know, we've started with a shared agreement that we want children to be okay. And we think that they should be okay with their families and in their communities and get the things that they need as opposed to surveillance, trauma and further, further impacts of harm to their well-being.

**TOM OATES** [00:29:57]: And then living up to a vision that somebody else has created?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:30:00]: Yeah.

**TOM OATES** [00:30:01]: For what? You know, what is, what is well-being? What, what does safety look like? What does, what is best for the child look like? You know. So, your second guiding principle is much more internal - enhancing our staff and infrastructure. So, this points to a culture of greater transparency, partnership, and equity amongst management and staff. And clearly, there's a lot of workforce elements that fall into this category. There's been a lot of, plenty of studies, plenty of programs, and so, I'm curious to not only, what's the goal? What does this look like? And maybe more importantly, how will you judge where you currently are in measuring to where you need to go?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:30:46]: Yeah. And so, yeah, guiding principle two for us is really about our workforce. And when we talk about workforce, we're also including our resource parents because they're absolutely working with us in support of, you know, helping children heal, helping ultimately support reunification, and the wellness of a child and a family. And I think in, in many ways because our system has been trying to meet this expanded scope of responsibility, it's been really hard for folks to do the work that is right in front of them, is their charge, is the expectation. And so, some of it is trying to, you know, think about what's the balance, what are we doing as we're shifting from foster care into in-home space - do I need a whole completely different workforce? No. There are a lot of transferable skills on this spectrum of care that we, we're providing. And so, it is really thinking about how is our, how is our workforce skilled and resourced and supported to do the work in the manner that we believe is the way we should be doing it?

[00:32:11]: And that means, are we recruiting the right folks? And are we clear in a job description about what your job is? Are we helping you learn and learn your job? Do you have the supports that you need while you're doing it? The decision-making that is required by our caseworkers is enormous. It's enormously heavy and it impacts people's lives for generations. And so, we absolutely are committed to making sure that our workforce has what they need in order to make the best decisions that they can and feel supported in it. And I think, you know, child welfare, you know, workforce has historically always been under a magnifying glass in responding to opinions and push back on if we're doing the right thing or we're not doing the right thing, we didn't do enough, we did too much - those sort of things. That's a really hard space to also be learning in. And the truth of the matter is, is I want my workforce to continually be learning new things. And in the spirit of we want to always continue to be able to bring our best selves to the communities that we're serving. We, we intervene with families, we're interacting with families at sometimes their, their most difficult moment. And I want a workforce that feels compassion for each other and for their families and communities that we're serving. And that's just critical. And it's interconnected with what I know we'll talk about in guiding principle three, it is I need more than compliance. I need creativity, I need innovation, I need commitment of, you know,

what is it going to take to help this family stay together? As opposed to going down a checklist of family, you need to do these things before we consider you being able to parent.

**TOM OATES** [00:34:15]: You know, and that comes from everything you mentioned around supporting and developing the workforce. There were a couple of key terms you talked about regarding support. And, and frankly, the work itself does not align to a psychologically safe work environment because there is constant pressure or there’s constant criticism from the outside. And so, that, that determination to not want to make a mistake. And if I follow the checklist, that’s what I’m told to do, then at least I’m not making a mistake. That’s not a conducive environment for great learning or for great sharing. So, creating a sense of belonging is what I’m pointing to, to where folks understand what real support and real engagement with each other to kind of make my own work environment more psychologically safe. And there’s a part of that that also deals not only with the workforce, but specific aspects of the workforce. And because child welfare is like many, many industries, organizations, agencies, and it all stems back to systemic racism. And how can someone truly have a sense of belonging when there have been continuous barriers and oppression. So, with your staff and infrastructure. So, we want to shift away from systemic racism to the services, but really look internally - what needs to happen along with all of this so where you’re kind of knocking down those barriers to women, to people of color, to the LGBTQ community?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:35:56]: Yeah, I think some of our strategies are including really re-imagining our partnerships with our education systems. And, and, and, and having some shared buy-in to what we, what we want a workforce that’s serving our communities here to look like and to have as far as skills. Because the truth of the matter is, is I need a diverse and educated and skilled workforce in behavioral health. I need it in our education system, I need it in our medical system, and I need it in our, in our human services system. And so, there’s some opportunity to really think about how do we support our education systems really thinking and actually helping start plant the seeds of, you know, what are the skills you need and, and, and not just have a kind of a conveyor belt of, you know, here’s the basic kind of social work degree, go, go do child welfare. But really bring in the conversations around systemic racism, around equity, around serving populations that are, have been marginalized and what the possibilities are.

[00:37:14]: And I think the other piece is, then in our hiring it’s looking for that. Looking for folks that kind of share those values. I don’t, I don’t necessarily need folks to come that know, feel like they know everything. But being then able to create the space along the way that we’re continuing to work and develop and support. Supervisors are critical. They are the linchpin in many ways to being able to have a workforce that is going to be able to do the work in which, the way in which we need it and they need the development and support, as well. Human Services, much like, I think other, other areas we habitually hire you as a caseworker, you do really good as a caseworker and you magically become a supervisor. We don’t necessarily give you any different skills to do that supervisory role. And then if you’re good at the supervisory role, we move you into management at a higher level of management. And we haven’t, as a system, necessarily supported your growth and development in those transitions or even to make sure that there’s equal access to the opportunities to learn and test things out and grow and develop and have, be able to see yourself growing in, in responsibility and leading the work. And I think that’s really where we’re starting.

[00:38:40]: And I think the other piece for me is if we are absolutely talking about workforce development and not just training. We throw training at a lot of things, and there is evidence, there’s scientific evidence to say that we, as adults, retain at best 10% of what we learn in the classroom. That’s

a lot of money and investment and time for losing 90% of what, what you're excited about in a classroom. And so, it's creating opportunities to be learning while you're doing. And constantly getting feedback and support and really shifting away from our reliance on solely it being training to fix an issue. But really how are we developing and learning to do the work in the way that we believe it needs to happen. And part of that is also getting the feedback from those we're serving.

**TOM OATES** [00:39:41]: Yeah, there's a, go ahead -

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:39:42]: And, that can be scary.

**TOM OATES** [00:39:44]: Yup. Because that feedback, people remember. That feedback is always a little different than you got an 8 out of 10. Because when training - and this actually leads, again into the third guiding principle of enhancing the structure or system by using data with continuous quality improvement. And this may sound really familiar to a lot of people because there's a lot that falls under that kind of category. But you talked about it earlier. And even with the training, how do we move away from checking the box and using data or training, something like that as a measure of compliance versus an actual tool toward improvement. So, I'd ask you the metrics, but I think a better way to kind of phrase this is like, what metrics are you going to be using to become more than a compliance factor and things that actually impact the day-to-day support of children and families?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:40:43]: Yeah, some of what we're doing are some, are some basic, like just looking at our data and asking questions. Do we have the right data? Is it, what is it telling us? And that is from the standpoint of, you know, what is the diversity of our workforce? And looking, you know, at how are people moving, moving throughout the organization and, you know, really challenging ourselves as we're trying to do new and different things of what might we need to do differently in order to impact, you know, where, where we want to improve. As far as our work goes, in some ways, it's really creating a safety culture around learning in that we, compliance, we can't get away from compliance. Compliance is going to be tied to funding and those sort of things. But it can't be the only thing that we're using. And so, a lot of what we're doing is also just helping people understand what is the data and information that we have and create a culture of inquiry of, you know, I'm looking at this data element, what does it actually say to me? What are the questions? I always, my team laughs at me because I come with more questions than answers. Because I think it's just a matter of like, this should get us thinking. You know, why is this, why is this outcome happening? And understanding contextual effects, all the things, the pandemic, that's been the question that we've been looking at our data is, is this during the period of which we had to do things differently because of the pandemic.

[00:42:26]: But I think the other space is, I think really, it's talking to folks, it's creating space for folks to be able to give constant feedback, formally and informally. And that they then see how their feedback and input translates into doing something different. Because, you know, if you ask, if you ask me a question and I give you feedback, there's some sort of expectation that you're then going to do something with it. So, if I'm telling you that I need, you know, as a caseworker, I need a better understanding of how the court system works and then I come and ask you the same question a year later and say, well, how are you interacting with the court and you're like, well I still need to know more about how the court system works. And then the next year came and asked you a question. Then it's like why am I even bothering giving you feedback? And so, it's making it meaningful. And then being able to have folks involved in what is the identification of the solution or the strategy that comes from the feedback. So, if, if the experience, if we're hearing feedback about an experience and we don't then include those folks giving us that feedback in the strategy development for how that experience can be

different, then we just kinda fall into our old habits of coming up with the idea ourselves. And I was very clear when I took this job that I'm, I don't come with all the answers. I need, this needs to be a team effort and a collaboration and try to actually just embody that in everything that we're doing.

**TOM OATES** [00:44:18]: It's embracing what improvement means when you're working with other people, is everybody builds. And so yeah, I hear where you're talking about where it's, it's having the open mind to be curious not to persecute or make sure that compliance is happening, but to truly be curious and then on the flip side, be curious to what people think with the intent of how can that make it better, as opposed to what did I do right or wrong?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:44:49]: Yeah, and I think the other piece that I think is going to be really important on our journey is when we're talking about those things, is connecting it to children and families and communities. And always keeping that at center, right? So, if, if your experience, if the feedback that you're giving, or something that you're doing isn't ultimately working towards the, the best possible service provision to children and families, then what are we doing? What are, what are we doing, really? And so, it is always kinda coming back to, and challenging ourselves because we want to be comfortable when we're doing our work and we want to feel like we're fully competent, and know, know all the things and, you know, do all the right things. And again, kinda coming back to our children and families, better off for our involvement in their lives. And I think that helps push us past some of our, some of our own stuff of wanting to feel like we kind of always know what the right next thing is to do.

**TOM OATES** [00:46:09]: So, you've been able to document what this vision looks like and break down some of the objectives. I'm curious about making it happen. And, first off, getting buy-in. And that's buy-in - I don't like to use the term top to bottom, especially because we rely on the frontline to the back office, so to speak, may be a better term and partners along the way. What were the key parts about getting buy-in?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:46:36]: I think, I think it in large part is just talking about it. First of all, we, we didn't write it in a vacuum. We basically gathered people's thoughts and thinking along the way and then put it into a shape and said, hey, this is kind of what we've been hearing. What's missing? Do you agree? Does this not actually capture what we're talking about, what we, what we want our work to be and how we want to work with communities and families? And then having that feedback then show up. And of course, now we put, you know, nice, lovely colors on it and that sort of stuff, so it's visually appealing. But we've, what we've been doing is we've, we've been doing these virtual road shows around the state to our district and branch offices. We've been doing it with our partners and coming to their board meetings, to their staff meetings, and really just talking about it. And, in many ways, we're also introducing ourselves as the leadership team because many of them have not met us or have not met me except for seeing me and a little Brady Bunch square. And so, being able to talk about that.

[00:47:47]: But I think the other piece as we're, as we talk through what this vision is and what our hope is for it, is that it's intended to be a living document. It is absolutely intended to ebb and flow with us as we evolve and grow and learn. And we've gotten some really great feedback from folks where they, they, you know, some have said, I think the language about partnership needs to be stronger. We think the language about our tribal nations needs to be really clear about tribal consultation. And then asking them to say, how are you going to bring this to life? So, we have some activities going on where we're asking folks to share how they're putting transformation and action. And, and that means that our hope is we're seeing across the spectrum, you know, not top to bottom, that we're seeing a kind of an all, all

aspects of our work and our spectrum of care. And we actually are working across our own department. So, the Department of Human Services has other divisions other than Child Welfare. We've got our self-sufficiencies, which is where TANF and SNAP and those sort of things live. Our Office of Developmental Disabilities, our Adults and Persons with Disabilities and our vocational rehab. All community-serving, all under the same umbrella of the Department of Human Services. And so, we've been talking with our, with our colleagues about how do we do this together? Because all of those systems are absolutely needed for our ability in child welfare to have a comprehensive service system for, for the families that we're serving. And so, let's do this together and find ways that we're kind of embodying this vision for transformation across the board. And you can call it something else, we're not that attached to the name of it. And so, we have some of our colleagues actually building their own plans along the same format and talking about really intentionally using shared language and calling out where we're intersecting and serving communities together.

**TOM OATES** [00:50:09]: So, it sounds like that this is not turning into a playbook to where here's how it's going to be structured, but more of what does vision for transformation look like for you? Here's what it looks like for us and the things, and with that common goal in mind. And so, it's really offering everybody to build their own partnership in terms of the bigger pieces to what does transformation look like for us?

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:50:38]: Yeah, and for, for me, what's important is, you know, the shared, the shared core nuggets in this is we are absolutely committed to being an anti-racist organization. So, what does that mean? We're absolutely committed to making sure that our workforce is diverse, skilled, and resourced across the board. We absolutely want our partners that are either partners in spirit or partners by way of contract engagement with us to absolutely embody these same values in, in, in the work that they're doing in partnership with us. And so, it's been a great opportunity to, to weave all of that into everything that we're doing. So, looking at contract language, looking at how are we creating policies and making sure, kind of putting, in some ways, putting some speed bumps up for ourselves so that we don't get moving so fast that we move away from what it is that we're really trying to kinda behave into, behave into reality, as far as changing how we, how we do business.

**TOM OATES** [00:51:52]: Couldn't think of a better way to summarize where you are and where you're going. Really excited and curious to see where Oregon goes as we, as we plowed through 2021 and moving forward. Really excited and thank you so much for, for being willing to, to - as we talked about at the beginning - to document the issues at hand, to call it out, and to set up a commitment to revert back, to change to, to truly transform. And so, Rebecca Jones Gaston, I thank you so much for, for the energy that you put in back in 2019 when the world looked so different to 2021, to where the world looks so different, so thank you so much for being a part of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast and sharing, at least this part of that journey.

**REBECCA JONES GASTON** [00:52:54]: Thank you for having me, it was my pleasure.

**TOM OATES** [00:55:58]: Well, as we mentioned, you can see Oregon's vision for transformation by visiting the Oregon Department of Human Services website and we'll have that link for you on this episode webpage at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov), just search podcasts and you will find this episode's webpage in there. We'll have a link so you can go and read that vision for transformation yourself. We'll also have links to tools and resources around implementing the provisions of the Family First Prevention Services Act, along with some of our recent episodes focused on driving change across child welfare systems, that support a more prevention-based approach, reunification, and addressing the inequities across

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child welfare. Now, if you have questions about your work supporting children, youth, and families and are looking for programs, data, tools - just visit [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov) or reach out to our information support services team at [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov). My thanks to Rebecca Jones Gaston and the Oregon child welfare division for their time, their insight and honesty. And of course, my thanks to you for listening and being a part of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates. Have a great day.

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:54:15]: 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.