

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast  
Engaging Fathers – Putting Lessons into Practice Part 1 TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Christine Lau, Connecticut Department of Children and Families; Abdul-Rahmaan I. Muhammad, My People Clinical 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]: Welcome in to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, everyone, I'm Tom Oates. Now, it's been a while since we discussed fatherhood and paternal family engagement. So, we're going to bring the topic back over the next few episodes. Now, it was a few years ago we brought together fatherhood organizations to discuss ways child welfare agencies could improve how they identify and work with fathers within the child welfare system. Now, across the next few episodes - and this is the first of three episodes - we're going to dive a bit deeper into actual strategies implemented by agencies to change the culture around thinking about and working with fathers across their cases. Now, studies have alluded to improved outcomes for children and families when fathers are involved. But despite that understanding and a general push across the child welfare field to improve how caseworkers reach out to and work with fathers, the facts are most agencies still aren't succeeding at connecting with fathers and paternal families.

[00:01:37]: So our conversation across the next three episodes, each feature teams. Improvement teams is the term that the project used from jurisdictions that were part of the Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare Project. Now in mid-2019, the project used a methodology called the Breakthrough Series Collaborative - BSC. And it's designed to support continuous learning by testing and spreading promising practices intended to improve outcomes on a focus topic. In this case, the BSC focused on improving placement stability and permanency outcomes for children by engaging their fathers and paternal relatives. Now, this episode, we dive into the work of the improvement team from Hartford, Connecticut. Now in our other episodes, we talk with teams from Los Angeles County, California, and Prowers County, Colorado to get a sense of a large, multi-tiered jurisdiction and a smaller rural but more nimble agency.

[00:02:39]: Alright. Christine Lau is an assistant chief for child welfare with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families. And one of the regions she oversees is the Hartford region. And Abdul-Rahmaan Muhammad is the Executive Director of My People Clinical Services of Hartford. Abdul is one of the key community partners within Hartford's improvement team. So, in this episode, we dive into some of the successful strategies that Hartford implemented. And they chose to test multiple strategies using a Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle. We also touch on the importance of working with community partners and those with lived experience. A lot of takeaways here on what was learned and what could be replicated by other agencies looking to improve how they think about and engage fathers within the culture of their agency. Okay - Engaging Fathers: Putting Lessons into Practice, featuring the work conducted in Hartford, Connecticut with Christine Lao and Abdul-Rahmaan Muhammad here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Christine and Abdul, welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. And Chris, let me just start with you here. Let's go back before the BSC and if could you just give me a sense of how you and how the state were addressing father and paternal family engagement.

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:04:05]: Okay. So first, thank you for having us, Tome.. Happy to talk about our work. So, I think in Connecticut on a statewide level, we had our eye on this fatherhood work, I'd say back to around 2011, 2012, when we developed what we refer to as our fatherhood engagement leadership teams, which we call them FELT for short. And those were groups of staff at varying levels in each of the area offices across the state here in Connecticut, at the agency that would come together on a regular basis to bring attention to the importance of fathers in child welfare. That work really was, I think, largely we would say sort of activity and event based in that each of the offices would - or regions we have, we also have regions - would hold different events to try and bring awareness again and attention to, to the importance of fathers. So, over the years we had things like a Dads Matter Too field day event, had a 5k run, we had a golfing event. So, different offices would sponsor things like that. Again, really all of bringing awareness both internally at the agency and in the community to the importance of fathers. I think that what the, the Breakthrough Series Collaborative did for us was it really brought us some structure around developing strategies so that we moved away from this sort of activity, event-based work and it forced us to look at our practice, use some data, and develop ways really for us to, to not just do the work, but then to measure the work as well. I think some of that was going on, but I don't think at the level that we took it to the Breakthrough Series.

**TOM OATES** [00:06:27]: There was an assessment that you clearly had to have done to take a look, you know, like you just mentioned how, how well are we, how effective is our work. Give me a sense of that particular assessment for the audience and what did you learn from it that helped you move forward?

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:06:45]: So, okay, so in the Breakthrough Series, what we used, each of the jurisdictions were asked to complete what was referred to as a self-assessment tool. And the self-assessment tool was, was organized into five domains. We also refer to it as our collaborative change framework. And the domains, you know, really I can share them for you quickly if you'd like me to. So again, there were five of them. The first one was focused on supporting the community systems and agency environments that really focused on a value and a respect for fathers and paternal relatives. And I do want to say, I want to go back to your first questions, one of the things that the breakthrough series also did for us prior to our involvement was it helped us to also focus on paternal relatives. So, I think that we had our eye on the need to engage fathers in the child welfare work, but by bringing in paternal relatives, it only really helped us to strengthen what it was we were what we were working on.

[00:07:56]: So that - so I want to go back. So, that was domain number one. Domain number two is cultivating racial equity for men of color in the child welfare system. Domain three was focused on identifying and locating fathers and paternal relatives right from the start of our involvement with a family. Domain four is assessing and addressing the strengths and needs and barriers for fathers and paternal relatives. And domain five is continuously involving fathers and paternal relatives throughout the lives of their children. And so, what we were able to do - and I'd like to have Abdul talk a little bit about this, as well - with that, with that self-assessment was ask ourselves a set of really critical questions in terms of using a rating scale from one to five, with one being your practice really needs a lot of work and five being like you nailed it, you've mastered this, your, you know, your work is where it needs to be. And as a group our team completed the self-assessment together, Abdul, as a community partner was on that team and I think it ended up being something that helped guide us. It helped to really put into focus where we needed to strengthen our practice, where we were doing okay, and what we could celebrate, essentially.

**ABDUL-RAHMAAN I. MUHAMMAD** [00:09:31]: I think that the highlight of the self-assessment was number one, by me, being a community provider, I often played a role of the person that gives a little

pushback. So, you know, when the DCF office is saying that they're a four, I'm saying to them, you guys are maybe a two. And allowing us to have conversations around why that's true and not making it like it's a negative but seeing that there's room for improvement to actually get to a four in a real way. And then secondly, I think that domain two, in particular was, it was almost like we kind of like went past it. And I think that most of the regions across the United States went past it. And when we went back to the Breakthrough Series and had conversations, it was kinda like highlighted for us on how we scored very low in it. But we didn't, we didn't, we didn't really do anything to kind of emphasize domain to cultivate an equity for men of color in social welfare. So, I thought it was very important for us to highlight that as opposed to move past it so that, because that's a big piece of - especially in Hartford - you know, the population that we serve. So, we're not cultivating equity, it's almost like, well, what kind of work are we doing for the men of color that we serve?

**TOM OATES** [00:11:02]: And part of that equity not only means who are you serving and are you paying attention to it, but who, who's on your team and who's providing that actual lens to say like, Abdul, you just mentioned, hey, we think we're at a four, but maybe we're at a two. Because if you look at it from this perspective or if you change your lens on something, you get to see it in a different light. And so, having that community partnership, Chris, with your entire team, give me a sense of, of who was at the table because clearly you have DCF staff, as well, but then you've got a voice like Abdul's that come in. Who's on that team that you guys were, were incorporating and kind of working shoulder to shoulder with?

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:11:46]: Yeah, so our team, as you said, was made up of staff at varying levels in the organization, from frontline social workers to myself as, as an administrator, serving as the senior leader and I think that what was, as Abdul said, what was very beneficial to us was to have him as a community partner. He's been a partner in our work for many years, so it wasn't like we just said, hey, be a part of this team. Like he had been, he had really been at the table with us doing this work for many years. And so it, it was also helpful for us to have as a member of our team a gentleman who was actually a supervisor with one of our fatherhood engagement services that we, a contracted provider, a gentleman by the name of Don Crocker, but Don also had worked with our agency as a paternal relatives. So, he had, you know, served in the capacity of caring for, you know, a relative, right, in a foster parenting way. And so, and Don is also a man of color and brought a lens to this work that was invaluable to us. And so, and our team was also diverse, not just in position, but in terms of makeup. We had, we had known that we wanted the team to represent, as Abdul said, the population that, that we serve. So, that was really important to us.

[00:13:28]: I think that when we thought about this domain too, cultivating, cultivating racial equity, I think we - we, meaning we, the DCF people - sort of came into it kind of patting ourselves on the back a little bit because as an organization, we had been at this work for quite a few years in terms of working to become a racially just organization. And we also have what we refer to as an anti-racist framework that we work with under so, that we work within and under as a framework. And I think when we came together and we were sort of scoring ourselves here, you know, we thought we were, we thought we were onto something, we thought we were doing the work we needed to do. And it was funny because that's what I think caused us to kind of go right past it and we really needed and got from Abdul and from and from Don what it was that they were on the team for, which was to kind of say, hey, wait a minute, let's, let's stop. Let's talk about this and let's get real about it. And as Abdul said, I mean, he has been a voice of reality in many, in many ways along, along the time we've worked together, so.

**TOM OATES** [00:14:55]: That's a great example.

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:14:56]: I do want to add one thing. We did initially have a dad on the team in the beginning. He came to I think maybe two or three meetings, Abdul, initially. And, you know, I was reflecting on this the other day - and I don't know if you remember Abdul - but when we had to, one of the very first things we had to do when we started with the BSC is they asked us to come up with a team name and a motto. And we were really lucky to have this dad with us in the beginning because when we were doing the work to give us a catchy name and a motto, he was in the room with us and he really pushed us and had quite a lot to say, and so, he contributed to that. And unfortunately, he wasn't able to stay with us for the whole time, for a variety of things, I think work interfered. He had just assumed custody of his daughters, a little toddler. He brought her to a couple of meetings when we're meeting in person. But he was a great asset initially to the team. So, I wanted to just add that.

**TOM OATES** [00:16:11]: That's a great example of not being complacent of when, when you assume you're operating at a certain level, but after time you just get used to it and you may need that kind of, as you mentioned, a reality check for someone to come in and just say, hey, are we still, are we doing what we think we're supposed to be doing or are we even doing what we assume we're doing? And someone can say, yeah, but not at the level four, but maybe at the level, at the level two. When you guys chose to address this and move forward, you chose to develop a series of small strategic initiatives. As you guys, if anyone looks through the materials they see you follow the Plan-Do-Study-Act instead of one single initiative. Why is that? Why not one big initiative versus, or instead the way you went with multiple smaller initiatives?

**ABDUL-RAHMAAN I. MUHAMMAD** [00:17:10]: One of the things about the Plan-Do-Study-Act model, it really allows for you to make mistakes and, or even be able to say this isn't working. And you can kind of like throw it away. So, if you took one big project and then you say and it's not working, that means you've gotta throw the whole big project out. But when we have small projects, when they're not, whether they got to the end or they, they aren't working very well, we were able to kind of like move past those and go with the ones that were working. I think that when we were creating our PDSAs, there were a lot of times where people were coming up with what would seem like something like the best idea ever and then when we started trying to implement it, it really wouldn't work the way they thought. And we were able to say, alright, let's not do that anymore. We'll move on to this next thing. So, I believe that that model really allowed for us to have flexibility, it allowed for us to be able to kind of be creative, work on the fly and to kinda like not get stuck in the mud.

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:18:09]: Yeah, I would agree with you. I think one of the very first things we, we learned in our, in our in-person learning session when we were able to get together initially was the small test of change is really the way that you want to approach any problem that you're trying to solve. And I think I have to agree with Abdul, I think we tend to try to develop some grand plan to tackle this, tackle this problem and it becomes very unmanageable. And so, one of the things like right off the bat we heard was what can you test by Tuesday or what can you do by Tuesday? Meaning like don't, you know, obviously you want to think about it, develop something but, but do something that you can test quickly, get a quick win if that's going to happen or, or get rid of it, as, as Abdul said. And so, I think, you know, our team came to this work and came to the breakthrough series with a lot of ideas, with a lot of things that they really, concepts and, and, and strategies that they, they wanted to test to see if it would stick, right? And they wanted to have some success and so - and they wanted it quickly. And so, I think it just, everything fell into place. And I think we left that first two-day session in DC with every single team member that went to that, to that to that learning session with an idea about something. When we got back to the office, they wanted to start to start trying.

[00:19:53]: And I mean, I think it was really exciting. I mean, we were wrestling with, wow, this is a really big problem and it's going to take a really big solution. But then when we broke it down, there were just all these little things that we tried. And some, as Abdul said, some of those things work and so we abandoned them and that was okay. But some of them took hold and we saw, we started to see and continue to see progress. You know, we've got a lot more left to do, but it was nice to see the work happening.

**TOM OATES** [00:20:31]: So, what did you, out of those that, that started to snowball and started to see some effectiveness., what are some of those strategies that come to mind when you think about the ones that were effective or are effective?

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:20:46]: Well, there's one that comes, comes to mind right away. Well, there's actually more than one but, but one that I think speaks to this, this notion of what we call moving the needle, right? How do we, how do we stop talking and start doing in a way that's going to get us where we want to be, right? And so we have a practice in Connecticut that's called the considered removal process. And so, you know, just sort of briefly, before we make any decision to remove a child from their biological family, we bring that family together to a meeting, to a considered removal meeting, it's exactly what it, what it says, right, where we are open and honest and frank with families to say, these are concerns that we have, if they rise to a level where we may need to take action your child might need or children might need to come into our care and we ask them to bring their supports to the meeting.

[00:21:50]: And so, we have staff who are considered removal facilitators and we just happen to have one of those facilitators on our team, she was on our Breakthrough Series team. And one of the things that she was noticing is that when families would come together, there were a lot of maternal relatives at the table. Sometimes dad was at the table, sometimes he wasn't. And if he was, he wasn't bringing many of his relatives. And so, one of the things that she really focused on and developed in what we call the pre-meeting, which is the work that we do internally with staff to say, okay, we're going to have this considered removal meeting, tell us what the issues are. Who's, who do you think's coming? Whose mom bringing? Right, so there's all this sort of planning that happens before the actual meeting. And she made a very conscious effort with a set of questions that she wanted to use at those pre-meetings to make sure that the social worker and the supervisor were thinking about dad. So, no one got out of a pre-meeting without answering a set of questions around, you know, have you reached out to dad? Will he be there? Who is he bringing? Has he made a connection to any relatives? Rather than, you know, typically what she was experiencing was a response to her question. The name of her PDSA was What About Dad? And so, when she would say, what about dad, often, people would say - people, workers would say - oh, he's not involved. Oh, he's not coming. And she would say, no, no, no, no. We're going to stop for a minute. Let's talk about this and she'd dig a little bit deeper, she'd ask a few more questions.

[00:23:47]: And I think across the board, you know, one would say, well, isn't that the way the practice is supposed to be? Right? That's how, of course that's how we do considered removal meetings, we include dad. But it was the incorporation of very specific questions, a very deliberate pause in the pre-meeting that she put into effect and began to measure it. Began to, you know, each month she'd take a look at how many considered removal meetings were there, how many had a dad, how many had a paternal relative? And that started to increase. We started to see an increase there. And as a result, I'll just add, we were able to divert children from coming into care, not just because the family was able to develop a safety plan or a maternal relative stepped in like a grandmother or an aunt, but we saw diversion by way of paternal relatives or dad stepping up saying, hey, you know what, I can do this. Let

the child come with me. I'll stay with my mother. Or let the child go with my mother, that sort of thing. So, that was one thing.

**ABDUL-RAHMAAN I. MUHAMMAD** [00:25:04]: It was also, one, like my PDSA was training. And so, we offered training to the whole Hartford office. We did, we did multiple types of training - everything from a half-day training, to a few hour and a half trainings. And I think that at the very least it put fatherhood in the forefront of the staff's mind and allowed them to kind of like, think about, you know, well, are we addressing the barriers to fatherhood? Are they working on different levels of engagement? Because a lot of times we say the word fatherhood engagement, and I'll often ask the question like, well, what does that mean? And it's kinda like, well, how deeply are you engaging someone as opposed to just kind of like saying hello to somebody is engaging them. And so, it's like really getting to the level of really where you're actually helping them through the process as opposed to just making a contact with them.

[00:26:00]: And so, I think that that one is a good one and I think one of the longstanding ones is our Father Talk newsletter that goes out every Friday. And you know, this is just one of the people that was on our team, she started doing the newsletter. She was initially meeting with people, as well before the pandemic started, and then, but ever since, So, now I think the last newsletter was up to -

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:26:25]: 63. For 63 straight weeks. She has - I don't mean to interrupt you, but it really I actually, you know, this is, this is a great example of starting out small and something really taking hold. So, when she left that first in-person learning session, she had this idea that she was going to once a week go to one of her unit members, right, one of her, somebody who sat in the cubicle next to her and she was just going to talk about fathers. She called it positive dad talk. And so, she started - this is when we were in person, of course - you know, she started talking to one-unit member and she started talking to another unit member. And then she had the idea of doing, I guess we'll call it a newsletter. It's an information sheet, basically. She calls it positive dad talk. And it's something about how important it is and why it's important to engage fathers. And so, then she started to expand that. I think she, she asked her supervisor to let her do that in like a unit meeting. And then she started hosting every Tuesday afternoon - she'd send out the newsletter on Friday - she'd host a positive dad talk the following Tuesday.

[00:27:50]: People would come together, whatever the particular topic was, they'd have, you know, they'd share stories, they would share practice tips, whatever. Then it caught on, we went virtual, of course, the pandemic happened and she started, doing putting it on Teams. It grew to the office so she, now she had, she had moved just from her unit to the entire office, joining on Teams, talking about the newsletter that she sent out. And it expanded actually from the office to - our office, the office in Hartford - to an office in Manchester, which is in our same region. And so, that, like we love to give that example because it really was just a small test that she wanted, something she wanted to try and, Abdul you're right, I just looked at her, her newsletter last week and it was number 63.

**TOM OATES** [00:28:50]: I'm curious when, you know, when all of these strategies first come to light and then they're just in everybody's head and they've just, they've basically written down what they want to do when they start, how do you determine success at a point like that? Knowing some can snowball like the example you just gave and then some may, you know, may not have the success like that. How did you guys, because we're in, we're in this kind of prove to me where, the where the resources are going and let's, you know, if part of the Plan-Do-Study-Act, you've gotta measure against something. What does success look like when, when you're coming up with all of these, specifically, when it comes to

something that, that can be looked at very vague of like, Abdul, you mentioned engaging in all fathers or paternal families?

**ABDUL-RAHMAAN I. MUHAMMAD** [00:29:45]: Well, one of the things I know is that another, another member of our team was Beth Landolini where she was collecting statistics on certain things within a DCF like, Chris, jump in on this because this is more in your line, but I know that we were trying to get data that would match the stuff that we were trying to do. So, Chris, go ahead and clean it, clean it up.

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:30:11]: Yeah. See, Abdul, you're speaking just like a DCF worker. That's why I love you. You, you might as well just be part of the agency.

**ABDUL-RAHMAAN I. MUHAMMAD** [00:30:20]: Clear the check, okay, I'll come.

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:30:21]: But we need you out there. We need you to keep us honest, so. Yeah, so, again, a part of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative was about measuring our success with like, real data, right? And so - which we could, we could actually have a whole other conversation around the awakening it was for us when we recognized that our system, our, we'll, we'll call it the computer system, right, that we have in Connecticut didn't collect that kind of data about fathers that we were, that we were after, right. So, so but however, that being said, we do have on through our administrative case review process, which is our six month look at our case planning process, we do have pretty robust data there that measures some what we call elements related to fatherhood engagement and assessing and addressing the needs of fathers. In the same way that we assess and address the needs of mothers as we're, as we're working with families.

[00:31:37]: And so, Beth, who was our quality improvement program supervisor, was able to help us organize the data that the BSC was asking us to sort of keep and collect. Some of it we had to do manually, some of it we were able to do through our automated systems. But when we, when we talk about measuring success, I think what was - which goes back to my, I think my comments earlier in our conversation was - how do we really want it to move from event-driven and in some ways really what we just described. Trainings, positive dad talks - those are all important around this idea of changing the culture of your organization, right? Thinking the way that people talk about dads, the values that we have about dads, and the importance of them being involved in their children's lives, particularly when child welfare is involved. And so, I think those were really good ways for us to get underneath the culture that we believe exists, which is primarily to sort of discount the dad, right? The Breakthrough Series forced us to actually look at our practice. So, to take that culture piece, our mindset and our, our beliefs, our values, our actions that we were holding and move those to the actual practice. Like what is it actually going to look like? And how are you going to determine whether or not you have success.

[00:33:23]: And so, where we began to see that success, I think in two ways. One is, you know, in conversations with staff, whether we're talking about a case, in supervision, whatever it might be - you hear workers naturally saying and the dad oh, and then I contacted the dad and oh, the paternal relatives. And so, that becomes sort of a natural part of the conversation. But we also saw in our data. So, because we get measured through these elements - it's kind of a, I'm not going to try to walk you through the exact process - but we get data right every month that gets pushed out to us through this administrative case review process and what we began to see in Hartford for the first time since, and Abdul has been working there for a long time, I've had my eye on the data for a long time. We started to see that needle moving around our measurements for engaging fathers, right? That those percentages they were, you know, the data was around percentages. The data for engagement of fathers started to

increase. The data around assessing the strengths and needs of fathers sort of assessing and addressing their needs, meaning our workers could demonstrate evidence in their case practice through their, you know, documentation that they were having a conversation with dad sufficient enough to assess what his needs might be, referring him to a service that could address the needs that he had. And then, you know, data, we started to see improvement around collateral contacts. They're call collateral contacts, right, which is basically helping us to make our assessment for father, the quality of visits with fathers, we were seeing improvement. There's, there's couple other ways but those are the, those are the ways right off the top of my head that we thought, wow, we're getting some traction here. We must be doing something right, so.

**TOM OATES** [00:35:35]: The biggest shift that I hear from this was a culture change. You know, just adding it into not only the lexicon, but just the thought process of including or being open, kinda opening up somebody's minds to saying there's this whole aspect, this whole other side, the paternal families involved. And then you mentioned the data kinda starts to back that up. It backs up the behavior. But I'm curious to some of the biggest lessons that you and your team learned. Maybe not it's specific toward engaging fathers, but maybe it's the greater implementation of the BSC. What's the biggest takeaway that you think you and maybe your team's -and including Abdul as part of the team - may have learned from this entire experience?

**ABDUL-RAHMAAN I. MUHAMMAD** [00:36:28]: Well, I think the biggest takeaway that I have from the experience is that, number one, I think the Plan-Do-Study-Act model is something that we can always implement. We can throw it in there anytime we want to and it allows for us to continue to push the work forward. It also is good to be in the breakthrough series with other parts of the United States, other regions, other, other people doing the same thing. So, we were able to hear things they were doing and have the opportunity to steal, if we needed to, if it was something that we wanted to give a shot here in Connecticut. So, I think that that was equally important, just to be able to say, where do we stand in all of this as well? And I think that, I think that being a part of the breakthrough series as a whole, I think it gave a greater emphasis on fatherhood than we would've gotten without the Breakthrough Series. And I think that that outcome - because for I mean, even now, I still feel like Hartford has one step up because they were able to be a part of the breakthrough series on the rest of the state because they, it was such intense information that was being shared with us. So, that's my thoughts.

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:37:50]: Yeah. I mean, there's, there are a lot of lessons, I think I'd have to agree that the PDSA model is one that we continue to use. And we were just in a meeting the other day trying to solve another problem, a different problem, and someone from the team said, well, I think if we apply the PDSA approach to this, we might be able to solve this problem. And so, and you know, this is another thing I think that comes away from that is when we're in conversations about how to solve a problem, you hear, you hear people who are on the team saying too big, back it up, slow it down, make, take, take a piece of that don't, you're, you're trying to take on too much. That's not manageable, you know. So, so I think, you know, we talk about PDSAs all the time. And we make, we make sure that we're trying to solve a problem using, you know, using that approach.

[00:38:54]: I also think what we've learned just as an organization from those of us beyond the DCF side, was we cannot do this work alone. Like, we could not have done this work without Abdul. We could not have done this work without, you know, without Mr. Crocker on the team. We needed also, we needed staff at all levels to be a part of this work. We also needed, you know, we needed leadership support. And I mean leadership support above me. I mean, I am a leader, you know, an administrator in the

organization, but I needed my organization to support the work that we're doing and we got that. We got that 100%. And so, I think that that was really important for us. You know, and I also think Abdul, you know, he sort of glossed over his training, his PDSA training. But it was really impactful. And it was impactful because he challenged staff to think about what they referred to as barriers to engaging fathers as not really being barriers. And I think that had a significant impact on that culture shift and that culture change that we are experiencing. Because it's always easy to, to offer up the reasons why something's not going to work when you're inside, you know, when you're inside the DCF world or the child welfare system. And when you have a provider and a partner like Abdul, you know, that made, it made a big difference. It really did.

**TOM OATES** [00:40:37]: You walked right into the question I was going to ask, which was the must-haves that you would, to be, that are necessary for success. And you, you talked about not leadership buy-in at all levels, but also having the right partners at the table to be, to be engaged and to be able to add those different perspectives. But I'll turn that question around and say if you were to go back and start all over again, what would you consider doing differently?

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:41:09]: I think we, right, go ahead, go ahead start.

**ABDUL-RAHMAAN I. MUHAMMAD** [00:41:15]: Well, I think one of the biggest things is that I would make a bigger effort at making sure we had fathers at the table. And, and when I say fathers, I'm talking about fathers in their rare, their raw form, not necessarily the most polished, you know, best suit and tie father we can find that'll be easier to work with. I'm talking about true fathers that are a part of the system who are going through the DCF process and with the hope of them being able to give their feedback, learn and maybe they will get a little polish on them through the process. But I think that that's the number one thing that, that I think where I would love to see more of is fathers. And then of course, I think everything else we had. I felt like, you know, providers, the leadership within DCF. I mean, our stuff went all the way up to the top. And so, it was like we really were able to push what we were saying out because it wasn't like we were speaking without anybody backing us up. You know, so and at the end of the day when we did our final presentations, it was like the Deputy Commissioner was like, you know, giving us the seal of approval on everything that we're doing. And I think that empowers the work even more when it's not just providers and supervisors, but it's the leadership all the way through. And I mean, even on our team we have Chris who, you know, she's a big wig. And then, you know, you also have Mauritz who is the office director. So, it was like everybody that was a part of the team, was even, you know, we had great leadership in that as well.

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:42:59]: Yeah. I would agree. We, you know, we often reflect on what we could have done differently. And by far everyone says, we really should have worked harder to keep that dad engaged or to find another father or to, to, serve on the team. I think we, I think in some ways we relied on Abdul's experience serving dads through his organization and his program. And I think we relied on, you know, the gentleman who I spoke about earlier who was a paternal relative caregiver, but also worked with a lot of fathers in the program that he was the supervisor for with a different agency. You know, and I, and we, they were sort of by proxy, they were the voice of fathers for us, but I do think that we would have benefited greatly by having a dad with us the whole way through. And, yeah, if we were to do, if we were to do it again, we would definitely, we would do that differently. Other than that, I really honestly, I've thought about it - I don't, I don't know that we would have done anything different. Abdul, do you? Well, the in-person - go ahead, say it -

**ABDUL-RAHMAAN I. MUHAMMAD** [00:44:26]: Yeah, like the pandemic not to have happened because I really thought the in-person meetings were much better than the Zoom stuff. So, I mean, not to say we didn't learn, I think we kind of everybody had to learn how to use Zoom. But I mean, it was great when we were going to Washington DC. It really felt like, you know, you just feel like you're doing something when you go somewhere? Like, you know, so I just felt like when we were going to DC and we were in those rooms, I really, I really felt like it was a big deal and I think that, you know, I think I was a little disappointed when we had to go to the Zoom model, so I just wonder how much, how different it might have been if you would have continued to be an in-person.

**CHRISTINE LAU** [00:45:05]: Yeah. You know, I did think of something that we could have done differently. And it really is just a, kind of a, in a halfhearted way, sort of a joke that we, we've had, which was when we had to go to the virtual way of meeting, Abdul would always say to us, we should be recording this. We should be recording this because the conversations were so rich and the experiences were so meaningful, alright, and to hear frontline, frontline staff on the team talking about what they were doing and, you know, just things that were working, things that weren't working. And he would always say, oh, we should've been, should've been recording that. We got smart somewhere along the way about sort of mid to late, you know, later in, in our, in our work together and we did start, you know, on Teams recording, but, but we always joke about that. We should have been recording it from the beginning because it really was an experience and we're trying to do our best to convey it to you here. But it was an experience that it just would've been great to have somebody like documenting it the whole way through because it's, it's harder to explain than it is to experience.

**TOM OATES** [00:46:26]: Well, what you've done is definitely shown a blueprint for when there is an initiative, when there is a cause or a desire for big systemic change, you know, how do we operate in this way? And so, some of those key things of what you mentioned, And it sticks in my head again about, like, well, can you, you know, can you have something to test by Tuesday? Right? Let's just start thinking about small incremental progress and build off that. The Plan-Do-Study-Act in terms of not everything is going to be perfect from day one, how do we adjust? How do we, we pivot or persevere, or maybe we have to put something aside. And you know, you talk about buy-in from all levels because if there's something that I heard is it wasn't one person's success by being the hero or the face. Because if they leave, then the momentum at times can, can, can weigh, you know, go by the wayside. But if you've got this entire team where everybody's got ownership and say and weight and moving things forward, then it's, it's, it's a collective effort that kind of steam rolls on its own momentum.

[00:47:40]: So you guys have provided a great example for that. And well, if you couldn't record every single one of your meetings, you are at least able to record this one here with us. Christine Lau and Abdul-Rahmaan Muhammad, thank you guys so much for sharing your time with us and talking with us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Congratulations on the work that you've done and that you continue to do.

**BOTH:** [00:48:08]: Thank you. Thank you for having us.

**TOM OATES** [00:48:11]: Now, if you head on over to [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov) to this episode's web page, just go to [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov) and search podcasts, we have a link to the BSC pilot study report. It's titled A Seat at the Table: Piloting Continuous Learning to Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare. You can read the insights into the implementation of a BSC and potential strategies for increasing father and paternal relative engagement in child welfare. We'll also have a series of information gateway resources on engaging fathers and paternal family members. There's a list of fatherhood organizations that you

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can search, along with links to the National fatherhood initiative and the National responsible fatherhood clearinghouse. We've also posted a link to a video from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families about the project and the importance of equity. It features members of Hartford improvement team discussing their fatherhood engagement strategies and the stages as they participated in the BSC.

[00:49:14]: You can find, of course, the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast on Apple podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, and SoundCloud. Go ahead and subscribe so you can receive each new episode as they launch every month. My thanks again to Christine Lau from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families and Abdul-Rahmaan Muhammad from My People Clinical Services for joining us on this episode. And of course, thanks to you for listening and joining us here. The Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates. Have a great day.

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:49:51]: 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.