Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Aysha E. Schomburg, Associate Commissioner, Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and 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]: And welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Tom Oates, glad to be here with you once again. And we come to you each month with the perspectives, lessons, insights and innovations moving the child welfare field forward that hopefully you can take away and help improve the lives of children, youth, and families. Hey, if you are new to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast, you can subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, and SoundCloud, and get caught up on the valuable conversations we’ve had across nearly 80 episodes. And you can receive each and every new conversation each month. Okay. This is a special episode. We’re going to try to explain what’s being done at the federal level to create greater equity throughout Child Welfare and how that connects to the work being done by state, local, and tribal agencies that directly work with children, youth, and families. This is a conversation with Children's Bureau associate commissioner Aysha E. Schomburg, who as we recorded this, has reached one year as Associate Commissioner. Time enough to understand the role and environment of the Children's Bureau and its ten regional offices, but also time enough to listen and gather information from - and you'll hear more about this - agencies, families, those with lived experience, and as Commissioner Schomburg put it, accountability partners.

[00:02:02]: Now, before being appointed to her role with the Children's Bureau, Commissioner Schomburg was Senior Administrator for Program Oversight for the New York City's Administration for Children's Services. Now, there she developed ACS’s operational infrastructure plans and capacity building strategies across the agency's program. Now also - and this has a connection to our conversation - she provided counsel to New York City's Office of Equity strategies on the implementation of the ACS race equity plan. And has provided recommendations on how to tackle inequities and racism in child welfare. Aysha Schomburg is a graduate of New York Law School and was appointed by the Biden administration to her post as Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau back on April 7th of 2021.

[00:02:50]: So recently, the commissioner articulated the Children's Bureau's priority goals and vision, with CB’s highest priority being to promote equity in state child welfare systems. Part of this included for priority goals to help drive how equity is advanced in child welfare: prevent children from coming into foster care; support kinship caregivers; ensure youth leave care with strengthened relationships, holistic supports and opportunities; and develop and enhance the child welfare workforce. Now we dive into each of those, talking about what's being done at the federal level and how this can be implemented at the state, local, and tribal level. But also talk about maintaining connections in the field and what she's hearing from professionals, partners, families, those with lived experiences, and how those connections were paramount to developing the priorities. We also get into the challenges of working these across a diverse nation with diverse needs. Now, before we start, I want you to listen to a word that we don't
hear enough of on the podcast. We talk a lot about innovations, tools, lessons, and implementing practice. But perhaps we don't hear enough about the word love. Okay, Let's get to it. Threading equity through our child welfare with Children’s Bureau Associate Commissioner Aysha E. Schomburg here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

[00:04:20]: Associate Commissioner Aysha Schomburg, welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:04:26]: Thank you, thank you for having me, Tom.

TOM OATES [00:04:27]: I appreciate it. And so, let's just dive right into it. It has been about a year since you've been on board at the federal level. And I want to first talk about your time here and the vision that you've put forward. So, if it's okay, I'm going to read something that you wrote and ask you to react to it a little bit - but about your vision. And here it is, word for word: “a loving approach to helping children obtain what they need to live with dignity by comprehensively supporting families through a collaborative network of carefully selected resources and effective public and private investments grounded in community and culture and a workforce fully devoted to serving with intentional equity”. That’s awfully broad. But it does put Child Welfare in a position of moving forward. I’m curious to how you came up with this particular vision.

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:05:25]: Well, Tom, I think when I was thinking about sort of creating a vision, the first thing I thought about was like, why do I do this work? You know, what, why do I wake up in the morning when I'm really, really exhausted and continue to do the work of supporting children and families. And, and I, and I do it for love. I do it because I love children and families, because I think supporting children is the most important thing that we can and must do as a society. So, I wanted to start there. And then I also think that when we think about how we support our children, right, we approach it with love. We allow our children to make mistakes. And I think everything that we do, we should do with the love of our children in mind. So, I wanted to really start out with that, a loving approach to helping children obtain what they need. And that happens, you know, we do that in our own families, but we should also be doing it in child welfare and other systems, if you will, that support children and families.

[00:06:33]: I thought really allowing them to live with dignity is really important here, right? We want for children and families - and I always try to use those together because children aren’t living separately, they live within their families - but we want to be able to support them to live a life of dignity. And, and doing that by a network of resources, community-based - that’s why I put grounded in community and culture, right - so, you want it to be community-based, but you also want to acknowledge and appreciate culture, there. It’s important because when we think about how we are going to support people and support families, we have to take into consideration their community and culture. Community is broad, community is a group to which anyone belongs. It could be, it could be a geographical community, it could be a cultural community, an ethnic community. But I think that we need to take that into consideration when we are thinking about how we support families. Just like children are part of the family, families are part of communities. Families have cultural practices and norms that we need to respect and acknowledge when we think about how we help families.

[00:07:40]: And then of course, the last part of the statement, which is really a workforce which is fully devoted to serving with intentional equity. You probably heard me talk a lot about the importance of equity in child welfare, but also in other systems and equity in terms of how we support our families and
so our workforce also needs to be fully devoted to serving with equity, to keeping equity at the center of
the work that we do and at the center of helping all families when we come in contact with them.

TOM OATES [00:08:14]: Yeah, and equity is definitely something that I want to be able to spend some
time when we talk in a few minutes and really dive into, not only as you talked about the vision, but the
priorities and the goals. And equity is threaded all the way, all the way through. So, you moved into this
role from New York City, which is a behemoth in amongst itselfs, but it's still a local agency and where
you're able to at least get more of a connection to those who are working in cases on a day-to-day basis.
But now, at this role at the federal level, can you give me a sense of what you're able to do to kind of
maintain that connection to what's happening now at the state, local, and tribal levels?

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:08:59]: So, I do want to say that even when we're, when I was in New York
City, we were always looking to see what other jurisdictions were doing, what sort of innovative
practices were popping up when we had a particular problem. We would take a look at what was
happening in other parts of the country or how they might be dealing with it. So, in New York City, we've
been very successful, but we've also sort of used the landscape of what's happening nationwide to help
inform any strategy that we would employ. And then when I came to that position and I realized, okay,
the world is much, much bigger than New York City, and so how do I really understand what's happening
across the country? And, you know, it was really kind of easy because I have regional offices and
regional program managers and Child Welfare program specialists. And my first, sort of line of
communications was with them to sort of touch base with my, my regional offices to say, you know, tell
me what's happening. And the, the benefit of being in a virtual world meant that I could be in several
regions within one week. You know, I could do three regions in a particular day where we would literally
you know, have conversations and they were so important because it was there that I learned a lot
about, like what's happening across the country. So, those, you know, those meetings and my
communication with the regional offices has been truly very, very important.

[00:10:30]: And in addition to that, of course, hearing from parents and youth themselves impacted by
the system either in foster care or having left foster care, or somehow having been impacted by child
welfare or other systems. You know, listening to what they have to say about how, about, about their
experience and about how improvements can be made. And then of course I have other advocacy
organizations and what I call external accountability partners who have been really, really important in
helping me to understand the landscape of what is happening across the country and where we should
focus.

TOM OATES [00:11:08]: And, I like the way you term them as accountability partners. As in terms of I
need to, I need to put the mirror on myself, I need to have that lens turned around - what am I missing,
or what are we doing differently, or what should we be doing? I'm curious, has there been any common
themes in terms of what you're hearing from all of these groups?

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:11:25]: Yeah, you know, listen, I'm hearing a lot. The truth is everything is a
priority and I'm hearing a lot. But, from young, from parents and from youth, I'm hearing, you know, we
don't want to be system involved. We don't want to be overly surveilled. You know, there's, listen, I've
been in child welfare for many, many years and it's always been an emphasis on prevention, right?
Ideally, we would keep families together and keep children out of care. And that's what I've been
hearing from parents and young people like, you know, help me before I need to be child welfare
impacted. So, that's the number one thing I'm hearing about prevention. Like, you know, we need to do
everything that we possibly can to keep families together and keep them away from the system. But I'm
also hearing that we need to support grandparents and kinship parents to step up to care for the children in their family, but who aren’t getting the support that they need. I’ve heard you know, hey, from grandparents, I have three grandchildren that I am that I am, I’m trying to support. I’m retired, for example, and you know, I need, I need help. And so, we have to hear that. I’m hearing from young people who aged out of the foster care system or who are about to age out of the foster care system that say, you know, I don’t have everything that I need. I need more supportive relationships. I need more resources. I want to be able to work, I want to be able to go to school. And so, we have to hear that. And then, of course sadly, I’m hearing about the mass resignations that are happening in our field and, you know, that are, you know, our field frankly, is in crisis.

**TOM OATES** [00:12:59]: A lot of what you've just told me, I can see back - and we'll dive into - the priorities and goals that you've announced. And so, before we really dive into those, with all these conversations, could you explain how you're able to take all this information from everyone and maybe put some weight into it? What did you do to be able to, to, to develop and identify those priorities and goals that we'll talk about in a second over your, over really the first year. I mean, this was not something that you announced in the first month, but something you've put together over the first year. So, I'm curious about what this past year of listening has been like and what you did to develop and identify your priorities and goals.

**AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG** [00:13:46]: Yeah, you actually answered the question in the question because that’s what I did, I listened. You know, I spent eight or nine months, really just meeting with pretty much anyone who would ask because there's always something to be learned from a conversation. And, and having really thoughtful conversations about not only what the problems are, but what the solutions are, that's also really important. Not that we, you know, that we not focus on the problems necessarily, but that we also have an opportunity to determine what some of the solutions are. And by that, I mean, not only the solutions that we talk about often, but the solutions that may be a little bit different. Solutions that push the envelope. And so yeah, it was a listening excursion, Tom, and that’s how I was able to sort of figure out what would bubble to the top, of, you know, the, the overall priority goal.

[00:14:50]: But with that, it was really, really hard because when you're talking about children and families and support, you know, everything is a priority and frankly, everything is urgent. But, but the conversations that I had over the first eight or nine months in the role helped me to figure out how we sort of categorized our priorities and then, you know, there’s so much work to be done within each of those.

**TOM OATES** [00:15:15]: So, let's start. The highest priority, which I guess is not a separate goal, but we use the term threading through promoting equity in state child welfare systems. And we are 15 months as we record this, 15 months away from the end of 2020. Though, the, the tumult of kind of the introspective nature that 2020 made us move forward in is clear - at least clear in the federal government from the executive order on advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities throughout the federal government. And that makes a clear statement about advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities, but you've added it in as your highest priority. Can you tell me why you think this is so important when it comes through the administration to the casework, to the interviews, to the actual boots on the ground impacting lives and families?

**AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG** [00:16:15]: You know, I love this executive order, Tom, and I talk about it wherever I go. The executive order really calls on the federal government to make changes, right? It’s the first of its kind. It calls on us to make the necessary and transformational changes to make our
programs more equitable. So, in all of the programs of the federal government that serve children and families, we need to be focusing on equity with respect to, you know, our access and outcomes for these families, you know. The executive order starts out by saying that, you know, Equal Opportunity is the bedrock of American democracy. But we know, like, in this country, we have a complicated relationship with equity and with equality. So, it talks about fairness but we also know that for black and brown LGBTQ+ folks and those at the intersections, as well as members of communities that have been historically under-served or disproportionately impacted by poverty. We know that for them, equality, equity, fairness has been, like elusive. And so, you know, it was really important and I was really grateful that this administration on its first day, on the president’s first day in office made this a priority for the federal government because it really kind of gives the federal government really the green light to go as far as we possibly can to, to advance racial equity and support for underserved communities - and I want to make sure that I mention our tribal partners here.

[00:17:51]: We have a government to government relationship with the tribes. They do not consider themselves to be a racial group, but a political group. However, when we look at the history of how our nation has treated tribes and tribal communities, there are rampant inequities there too. So, we have a lot of work to do and this executive order has sort of been the foundation for a lot of the work that I think that we'll do in child welfare and certainly the, the priority goal that we've identified.

TOM OATES [00:18:25]: Some of this actually goes right back into your vision. You've used terms like dignity and culture and, and equity. So, where you even say green light, it almost makes it part of the initiative, the authority, even, or the responsibility to start at the federal level. So, going back to, I guess, a vision, so in your mind, what would be the difference? What would Child Welfare look like, act like, if did operate under a true era of racial equity and greater support for underserved communities?

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:19:05]: Well, you know, just, I first want to say there are many systems in our nation that have failed at advancing equity, and child welfare is just one of them. I mean, you can take a look at the history, you can think about the orphan trains, the boarding schools for native children, the over surveillance and criminalization of black and brown families. And so, you know, where child welfare is concerned, all you have to do, Tom, is look at the statistics - who was in care, which children had been separated from their families. And like, for me, I feel that we constantly need to be in a posture of pursuit of justice for black and brown children who've been overrepresented in the system. And the reason for that is we have a, like I said, an overrepresentation of black and brown children in the system, so when you look at the outcomes, you see that those children who don't have a fair shot at success, they don't have a fair shot at life, right? Sometimes they beat the odds. But in general, they start at a deficit where other children don't. So, I think that we need to, we need to do right by those children.

[00:20:19]: So what does it look like, you know, when you asked me about what equity looks like and racial equity looks like in the child welfare system, the first thing I think about is what the inequities are, right. So, I think about the, again, the over surveillance, I think about the mandated reporting, you know, which is sort of laden with bias. We have people calling in, calling child protection on children who show up in a classroom or an after-school program with dirty clothes. Like in a perfect world, a child, a child welfare system wouldn't even take that call. But they would point in another direction and that direction would be here are, here's a conglomerate of community resources that are there to help the family. Perhaps the family is struggling with poverty or there's some other issue. But it’s, that’s not a child protection issue, necessarily, right? That, you know, in a perfect world, a mandated reporter would only make a call when a child is in imminent danger. And so, we have a lot of work to do there, as well.
[00:21:25]: So, I think that’s, you know, that’s what I think of when I think of advancing equity, because what you find is that those calls, those calls that come in, the over-surveillance that leads to those calls really is what leads to the disproportionality that we’ve been discussing - the black and brown children that are that are in care. And that happens nationwide, it happens around the, around the country where there’s a particular ethnic, culture, racial group that are being sent into the foster care system, rather than being helped.

TOM OATES [00:22:05]: Part of what you’ve described, go through the outcomes, right? And, but within the highest priority as you’ve listed, we’re talking about equity in state child welfare systems and you, you touched base that there are multiple systems throughout the government that have, have, have to come with some, some ideas of reckoning and change. But let’s flip this around and talk about the impact of an equitable system to the child welfare agencies themselves. So, when we talk about what would it look like? What would it act like? What would the agencies look like? What would the agencies act like in an era as what’s in this vision and looking forward?

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:22:54]: I think you’ve probably heard this before that you know, when a child welfare system is truly successful, we’d kind of all be looking for a new job, right? It wouldn’t exist if, you know, if the child welfare system was truly equitable, the system would be a fraction, a small fraction of what it is right now. Like, there would be no, there might be a need for a certain type of support for certain children and certain families, but it would be so small because like in an ideal world, right, the community would always come together. Extended family, community would always come together to support a child or a family in need. So, you wouldn’t necessarily need government systems to interact with your families to do so. There are places in the world where foster care is unheard of. A child needs help, a family needs help, a parent needs help - the community comes together to help that family. So, I think, I think, you know, a truly equitable system - because we know it’s so unfortunately inequitable - would create a really, really small system, if there even needed to be one at all.

TOM OATES [00:24:09]: So, let’s dive a little deeper into, into the systems themselves. And so, for the majority of our audience are those who work in child welfare systems themselves. And so, while the federal government now has the green light to start really making change, we also need to see change at the state, local, and tribal levels. So, I’d like to walk through each of those four goals that you’ve laid out and over-arching to thread this equity in state child welfare systems. But, I’d like to get a sense from you on two things. First, well, what’s being done for each of these goals at the federal level? And then secondly, what those working at the local, the casework level, can do to kind of live or embody these goals. So, if it’s okay, there are these - I shouldn’t tell you you’re the ones who wrote them - but the four goals. So, let’s, we’ll start, we’ll start with the first one of prevent children from coming into foster care. So, if you could what’s being done at the federal level? And then, what can those within the agencies themselves do to live those goals?

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:25:21]: So, prevention should always be the number one priority that we have. You know, again, and it goes to my statement that I just made that in a perfect world we wouldn’t even need foster care, right? That we would be helping families before there was a need to separate families. First thing I think of when I think about what the federal government is doing is the Family First Prevention Services Act - what we call FFPSA. It’s intended to prevent children from coming into care. It actually shifts the resources, the funding resources. It redefines, re-prioritizes the funding and says let’s help families before there is a need to come into care. And so, it has the potential to really, I think, sort of push as far as we can in this direction of upstream. And by that I mean, you know, helping families as soon as we know that they need help and in a way that prevents them from even coming in the
direction of the child welfare system, right? And so, the Family First Prevention Services Act is the way, one way in which the federal government is saying yes, we want you to be able to support families up front and before there’s a need for foster care, really important.

[00:26:44]: I think also states need to take a look at their statutory definition of neglect. This is one of the things that I’ve also been talking about a lot, you know, across the country, each state has the definition of neglect and I reviewed the definition of all of the states actually and you know, what I would say to stats and, you know, their legislature is what does your definition of neglect say about the door to foster care? Does it, does it conflate with poverty? Does it conflate neglect with poverty, is it a conveyor belt for families who might just really need help. I’ve also been talking a lot about cash assistance for families and we know that there are some times when you know, families, I talked earlier about a child with dirty clothes, perhaps that family just needs help with money to do laundry and that sort of thing. And so, I think we need to start talking about some of the things that, you know, I don’t think that government has been, has been comfortable talking about previously, like helping families with cash assistance.

[00:27:51]: So, all the states need to take a look at their definition of neglect and examine and where needed, amend those definitions so that they are not confused with poverty or, or criminalizing poverty even. I would say inter-agency partnerships are very important. I would say specifically to folks at the state and local level, when was the last time you had a conversation with your housing agencies or with the Department of Education? You know, we serve mutual families, and for example, do you have a contact at the Department of Education? Can you, you can pick up and call about anything. We can’t work in a vacuum when we’re supporting families and children, we’ve gotta be able to have conversations with those other systems, for example. And that also helps with prevention, when we’re in constant communication - that’s one of the things that when I was in New York City, I, it was one of my main priorities.

[00:28:54]: And then probably lastly - and check your biases, you know, for those of us who are mandated reporters, ask yourself like, why are you making this call, is this child in imminent danger, or are there, is there another option? We need to sometimes as mandated reporters, like, surveil ourselves, you know, and figure out like what, besides making this call to Child Protection, which might cause this child harm for the rest of their life, what else could I do.

TOM OATES [00:29:27]: This goes back to as much as you talked about some legal changes or understanding how a state defines neglect, I'm going to pull back to maybe one of the first sentences you uttered in our conversation about a loving family and whether laundry or housing can prevent someone from having a loving family - that's, those are two completely separate issues. But if you're able to support the loving family with the bridge that they may need, then you've got a family that stays together, then you've got the best interests of the child. So, starting to look at what's most important in someone's family and we have a lot of different terms. But, I'll be honest with you, rarely have I heard that term loving coming from anyone who works in any sort of administration or policy or in those realms. But to put that first, is one of the biggest things in preventing the separation of families.

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:30:34]: Yeah. Thank you for highlighting that, Tom, because I've gotten some, you know, I've heard that before, like love, you know, that's not, that doesn't go in a vision statement, like what are you talking about?

TOM OATES [00:30:44]: When has child welfare ever been concerned with the loving family, oh no!
AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:30:50]: Right. Yeah. But you have to have a loving approach and one way you can do that is say, would I want somebody to call child protection on my family if this were the case? How would I deal with it if it were my own family, my own nephew, my own son, my cousin. We would take a loving approach and that’s how we need to do it, in my opinion.

TOM OATES [00:31:11]: So, you just mentioned if it was my cousin or a nephew or someone else in maybe an extended family, which leads into that second goal of supporting kinship caregivers. And let me pull back in saying, not all kinship families are blood-related because we also deal with fictive kin or, or informal families. But making that an actual goal of supporting kinship caregivers. And again, I’ll go back to what we’re asking, what’s being done at the federal level and then what, what is it that can be done by those listening who work at the local level?

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:31:45]: Yeah. You know, I almost don’t, you’re right, there’s kin and then what we call fictive kin and we use that term but I’m starting not to like it because it sounds like they’re fictitious. And they really aren’t. They’re very real people in a child’s life who the child knows and can be part of the circle of support for the family. And so, for those who may be listening, fictive kin might, might be someone like a teacher or a baseball coach or someone who, as you said, Tom, is not blood-related, but is still really kin or part of that extended family. And it’s really important that we think about extended family members, extended kin when we think about who in a child’s life can be supportive, not only of the child, but of the family as well, right? You know, currently, there’s one licensing standard and the federal government has an opportunity now and we are going in that direction to allow for flexible licensing standards for kin families.

[00:33:00]: So, at the moment, a kin parent would probably have to meet the same standard in most jurisdictions as a resource parent and a resource parent in most cases, will have had significant training, a home, a room that is really nicely done and decorated and just ready for a foster child and you have resource families that kind of, you know, make space for children and are just kind of ready for that, for that phone call when needed. But a lot of times, this is not how it happens for kin. It’s a last minute call. It’s, hey, you know, Auntie Aysha, you’re, you know, your nephew needs help, are you able to whatever now and I may have not been trained. I was not prepared for this moment in my life yet, I would rather my nephew be with me than with a strange family across town, for example. And so, what we want to do is to allow jurisdictions to have a, have a flexible licensing standard that says, Hey, you know, I may not have, you know, I may not have a separate bedroom that’s all set and ready to go for my nephew, he can share a room with another child in our family.

[00:34:08]: And, of course barring the safety standards. We of course want homes to be safe and we, you know, we would maintain that. But allowing for, sort of not holding kin to a licensing standards of another resource parent who has been fully trained and fully prepared. So, I think we want to be able to do that. We want to encourage states to to allow kin to step up and to support their, to support children in their families, but also to support those kin. So, we can put, we can put, you know, a child with their grandparent or with their aunt, but we also have to acknowledge that that family may need help. And by that I mean money. Children, children need things that cost money. So, we can’t necessarily just drop the child off and then turn around without, without support for that family. And so, the federal government is moving in the direction to make sure that there is, there’s flexibility for kin and that there’s adequate support for kin.

[00:35:16]: And we, what we’re hoping is by doing this, we will shift to - there’s probably like I think, as I understand it about a third of the families are now, children in care are with kin - That should be close to
a 100 percent, if you ask me, that our children are living with kin or living with people who they are familiar with. We already know that they have better outcomes when they stay with family, they stay close to their community. They have better educational outcomes and better outcomes all around. They are, actually their time to reunification is shorter. And so, we want to move in that direction when in a last resort, a child has to be in foster care. And how can states live this goal? I mean, listen, if you place a child with kin, you know, again, make sure that that the family is supported not only with the regular scheduled case work check ins, but also with the appropriate financial supports and funding. So, make that commitment when we, when we place a child with kin.

TOM OATES [00:36:23]: And recognizing also - and you had mentioned before - this comes suddenly. This is not something that somebody normally signs up for. But they do this - again, back to, back to the theme from the very beginning - the same reason resource parents do, they both come from a place of love. But it can be a huge change that someone’s not prepared to support in terms of resources, yes. But also support in terms of recognizing that this is a huge change in someone’s life, in these caregivers lives. And so, being there to support them emotionally and mentally and at times, like you mentioned, financially the same you would for, for a resource parent, as well. Well then, there’s also the situations where youth are still in care. And your third goal - ensure youth leave care with strengthened relationships, holistic supports, and opportunities. And I’d like you to kind of really walk-through where this one specifically came from because the definition of it, I’d love for you to pull apart a little bit more before we get into what’s being done at the federal level and then what can be done at the local level of why this goal was something that you singled out.

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:37:39]: Yeah, and this comes directly from conversations that I had with young people who were either in foster care or recently aged out of foster care or, you know, maybe young adults who had been impacted by the system. You know, they talked to me about having, wanting to have normative experiences when they’re in foster care. They talked to me about - one young lady said you know, I couldn’t even join the dance club because nobody could sign off, you know, my foster parents couldn’t sign off. The agency wouldn’t sign off. But I’m trying to be a normal high school student, and I was unable to do that. Of course, young people talk to me about, well, at some point, you know, I had developed my own, my own circle of support and I wanted the agency to acknowledge that. So, it wasn’t, I didn’t necessarily want to be adopted, like adoption is not necessarily for everyone - this is what young people have told me - but I did have relationships with four people who were really, really helpful to me. And I wanted those four people to be my supportive family members. And they talk to me about, you know, a shift toward allowing young people to identify who for them is their extended family.

[00:38:56]: So you know, I will, I will say that we started out when started thinking about this particular goal, and really what I wanted to do was to, for this goal to be like supporting young people who are in foster care, when you’re there, how can we be supportive? And then, also when you are transitioning out of foster care into adulthood, what do we need to do? What does the government need to do? How can we inspire jurisdictions to do more? And the first time we crafted this goal, we said ensure that youth leave care better than when they entered. And, and when I was thinking, you know, before I sort of rolled this out, I had conversations with young people and I talked to them about these goals. And a young person said to me in the room that we were in, said well who does, what does better mean? Who determines what’s better, who defines that, who defines what’s better? And I just listened. And then another young person said yeah, I don’t, for some of us, we didn’t even need to be in foster care in the first place. So, why is it the system’s job to make us better? So, I’m, I’m listening posture and they said, no, we want to lead care with strengthened relationships. And then another young person said we want,
we want holistic support and another young person said you know, we want to leave, we want to leave care with opportunity.

[00:40:26]: So I said, well then, you know, how should I - I posed the question to them - well, how would, how do this goal, you know, how do I redefine the title of this goal? They said ensure youth leave care with strengthened relationships, holistic supports and opportunities. So, this goal directly comes from young people. The wording comes from them. I'm still thinking about like what the federal government can inspire of jurisdictions to do, but also what actions we can take or what investment, investments that we can make ourselves. But I think you know, the important, what I want, the reason why I tell that story is that we have to magnify youth voice. We have to let them talk. We have to listen to them. They actually have a lot of the answers. So, I've been fortunate to be able to be in the room, to have their attention, frankly. And I, and I intend to continue to talk to young people to figure out how we're successful in this goal.

[00:41:29]: And you know, for example, in this month's Children's Bureau Express, I coauthored a piece with two young mothers where they talk about being young mothers. And I just think that we need to continue to amplify the voices of young adults and listen to them. And how you live this goal? You live it by listening to what they're saying and taking action. Do what you can, advocate where necessary. Don't just listen for listening sake, right? Listen and act. And really, don't be afraid to push for change.

TOM OATES [00:42:00]: And then for those caseworkers that's listening and involving, right. When the youth have their own support network and they want to be able to make that clear and make that a part and be able to share it and then have that supported. And so, you made a plug, so I'll plug it as well - Children's Bureau Express. For those of you that head over to childwelfare.gov on this episode's webpage, we'll make sure we have a link to that article that, that Aysha just referred to on CBX. And you mentioned this at the very beginning, and it's the fourth goal. And although 2020 is behind us, we are still, I think in this midst of the great resignation and, and child welfare is not immune to this at all. But, develop and enhance the child welfare workforce. And while this is understood - anybody can look at the turnover numbers - you had mentioned this in your vision specifically about a fully devoted workforce serving with intentional equity. And I'll offer to you - and tell me if I'm wrong - but that also means that workforce is served with equity, not only serving with equity. So, that means not only how the workforce is acting, but how they're supported internally. And I don't wanna put words in your mouth. But when I saw that up front, I thought that that's a reflective both on how, how a workforce acts and how they are acted upon.

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:43:35]: I like those words a lot, thank you, Tom. We have so much work to do here. You know, I think about from when the pandemic first hit and, you know, I was working in New York City and we were, there was a lack of PPE all around, you know, there was, you know, how do we get PPE for for our child welfare specialists who were still on the ground, still having to go into homes when necessary. And we had to advocate, you know, child welfare professionals are not necessarily considered first responders, but in my heart, they are. And so, we had to sort of, you know, the way that the city was triaging PPE was like, you know, the first responders that we normally think of, our police and fire people. But we needed, also PPE for our child welfare professionals who were going into homes and doing the work every day, whether there was a pandemic or not, right? Right, so, you know, they didn't, they couldn't put a, pack up all of their office and their laptop and go and do their work from home. They had to still be doing it.
[00:44:52]: And I felt at that time that we shouldn’t have had to fight so hard to get the PPE for these really important professionals charged with making sure that our families were safe and intact at a time that we’ve never experienced before. So, we have a lot of work to do here. We have to not only think about, like, how we attract, recruit, and retain professionals - because we know we’re having issues with that - but we have to understand why they’re leaving. We have to advocate for compensation that messages that their value and the value of work of supporting children and families. We need to think about what’s really required to do the work well and who can do it best? I mean, I’ve been thinking a lot about like, are we interviewing folks with lived expertise for our professional roles? Are we too focused on who has the MSW? And should we be thinking about what are the types of experience, sort of equate with some of the educational requirements that have traditionally been part of our profession.

[00:46:05]: But also, you know, a focus on employee wellness. You know, this is hard work. A lot of the professionals in our field, they go out every day. They support children and families who have, have any particular type of need, it can be an array of different needs, and then they have to go home often and be a parent, right, and support their own families. So, what are we doing to make sure that the professionals in our field are well, that they’re taken care of, right? And, you know, even like when was the last time, you know - I would say to jurisdictions - you to checked in on the wellness professionals in your agencies? Have you asked how are you doing? Are we making investments in wellness for them? And so, there's still a lot to talk about. And I’m still talking to the workforce and to others to figure out what exactly, you know, we can do at the federal government to be supportive.

TOM OATES [00:47:17]: It is something that where you have to deal with each individual almost on a, on a human, by human family, by family case-by-case basis with your workforce. Because as we, as we've learned over the past two years, folks may be working from home, but we're all working with home. And there is no clear separation. And especially if you work in a stressful environment, that stress carries over and how are you handling that and what can you do to support, you know, from hiring to training, to promotion to support, and that cycle all the way around. But making that a priority and threading equity through. And one of the themes that I'm hearing - and of course, you just mentioned it coming from the federal level - of incorporating lived experience and not incorporating it as a, as a step along the process, but in helping to build the process. And really trying to get that connection of putting a proper lens, an equity lens on how we operate.

[00:48:28]: Well, you talked about connecting with the workforce and you've got a different workforce to deal with now than maybe with New York. And you had mentioned your ten regional offices and connecting with them. But each regional office is different. We have a diverse nation, we have a diverse field. So, shifting gears a little bit, I'm curious now to the challenges that have come with managing that diversity within the Children's Bureau's ten regional offices.

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:49:57]: Well, you’re right, Tom. I learned quickly that each of the regional offices is different and, you know, they each have their own way of working with jurisdictions. And, the first thing I did, probably, was make a conscious decision to celebrate their uniqueness, you know, rather than trying to make them sort of fit in this, the same bag. And I learned not only did the regional staff approach work with jurisdictions differently, but that the states and the regions approach their work differently. And so, it makes sense that there’d be variations in how the work is done. I mean, listen, this country is so vast, just think about, for example, what's happening in West Virginia and rural issues that are in Montana. And then you have, you know, really urban areas. And so, it makes sense, right, for there to be a difference in how, how the work is approached. And so, I don't necessarily think that’s a problem.
[00:50:00]: But that said, I have to acknowledge that we do have a compliance role to play. And then diversity is fine as long as it’s not leading to inequitable outcomes for jurisdictions, right? So, in other words, we can be different from region to region, but there are certain aspects I think of our monitoring role that really require fairness and consistency. And, you know, I think sometimes it’s hard to strike that balance.

TOM OATES [00:50:25]: And, just following up on this, I can only imagine at the policy development stages, once something is written, you have to look at it 10, if not 50, if not more than that different ways because like you mentioned, how does this policy affect what’s going on in, in the middle of a major city versus how does this policy get implemented in a, in a farming community or, you know - who knows where it comes into in terms of resources where I need to worry about clothing and weather conditions in the Northeast. That's going to be completely different than Southern Florida. And just so, just following up on that, when it comes to developing policy, how were you able to at least try to maybe listen a little bit more to say, Okay, what does this mean to everybody? And how do I make - you can't make policy one size fits all, but you kind of have to make sure it does cover a wide umbrella.

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:51:27]: You do, and the way you do it is listening. Having a diverse group of people at the table, right? You don't make the policy in a vacuum. You hear what people are telling you. You know, I make sure that I’m checking in not only with our regional program managers and our child welfare program specialists who are really in touch with what's happening on the ground. But, also my central managers at Children's Bureau, right, so that when you're thinking about policy, really, everybody has to have an opportunity to weigh in because there’s so many different aspects as you just pointed out of so many different things that we would have to consider in making a policy and to making sure that we're inclusive. And, and so it just really involves making sure that, you know, pretty much everyone is at the table to, to inform how the policy is developed.

TOM OATES [00:52:23]: Well, many of those regions and many of the states within those regions also are working with, with their tribal partners. And so, you created Tribal Think Tank - and I’m curious, who is part of that group?

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:52:35]: The Tribal Think Tank is, well, I created the Transformational Tribal Budget Proposal Think Tank - that’s the long name. But we call it the Tribal Think Tank for short. And it consists of, you know, staff in the Children's Bureau who volunteered to be part of the think tank. And also, some of my colleague at the ACF, you know, Office of Grants Management and the Administration for Native Americans.

TOM OATES [00:53:05]: So, then what's coming out of that? I'm curious to, you know, any of the ideas or proposals that, that have started to rise in the months that the think tanks been operating.

AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:53:16]: Well, we created the think tank because there are certain issues that are specifically, that specifically impact the access, the support, and outcomes for tribes. And I learned about it really in my meetings with the regional staff, I learned about, you know, that there are a lot of tribal inequities and some of them are issues that Children’s Bureau can fix with some time and some focus, but some of them really require a legislative fix. A lot of them are historical, I'll say, and they require a more of a legislative fix. So, I said, you know, let's start thinking about our budget proposals now. And I call it the Transformational Tribal Budget Proposal because I want it to be transformational in how we think about it. And so, you know, so the work is happening and we’re being transformative, but of course, I’m sure you know, we cannot talk about what what’s bubbling up because it’s all, you know,
embargoed until it isn’t. But, what I want is for us to be able to look back in ten years and say, you know, we made that very important change, that impact in our tribal access and outcomes, particularly for children.

**TOM OATES [00:54:34]:** And maybe the best part of those conversations is - and again, which you talked about with all the conversations is - being able to learn and being able to be exposed to something different. And instead of being affirmed, we become informed. And, and that’s kinda one of the bigger themes of, of how you understand or create greater equity, greater inclusion, greater diversity is kind of exposing your own limitations and broadening those. Finally, before -

**AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:55:05]:** Right and not only - I’m sorry, Tom - but not only listening, because you hear me talk about that a lot, but, you know, being able to say, you know, after I heard about some of these, the tribal inequities and I have been hearing from many of the regions, probably all of them about it. And really say, you know, what steps can we take to address some of these inequities? And so, it was really important not only to listen but also to act.

**TOM OATES [00:55:30]:** Yeah, what can be done and then have the power to actually enact and work upon it. So, let's take a look ahead. Looking for, the next year, the next 18 months. What opportunities do you see for the field, for the child welfare field in this step toward overarching advancement?

**AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:55:53]:** Hmm. Opportunities. I mean, we’ve spent a lot of this conversation talking about opportunities to address inequities, we’ve talked about living the goals. I feel fortunate to be working with the Biden Harris administration because I feel like this administration has already demonstrated and shown support for children and families and shown that it's among its highest priorities. So, I feel like, you know, there's so much opportunity within the administration because it has been prioritized by the president and vice president. I see opportunities for how the federal and state governments can work closely with communities. I don't know that this is happening as often as it should be, but I've been fortunate to be part of some work that's happening in Phoenix, where the state and the community are trying to come together to keep families together, to reunite families, and to address the needs of families and children in Phoenix, for example.

[00:56:58]: I'd like to see more of that. I see opportunities for Family First legislation to re-prioritize, like I said, and redefine how federal dollars are being spent and to take the term upstream to the next level, if you will. I have to mention the extraordinary work that our federal grantees are doing and that we need to learn from that work and lift that work up and share it and implement what we know works. Again, we need to walk the talk of authentic engagement by truly listening to folks with lived expertise and stepping out of our comfort zone. When I say our, I mean, a lot of government where often, we're hosting the meeting, we're in control, but we need to be comfortable not being in control. And going into communities and having the conversations. And sometimes they may feel more hostile than we want them to feel. But you know, there's a lot of learning to be done with that sort of what, what Martin Luther King would call creative tension, right?

[00:58:11]: So, it's going out of our comfort zone, going into communities. That's a commitment that I've made, right? I'll finally be traveling this year and wherever I go, I've committed to meeting with system impacted members of the community, right? We can't just talk about it, we have to be about it. So, I see more opportunities to be in closer proximity with communities. I see opportunities for doing better with respect to racial inequities, as we’ve discussed. To check ourselves, check our own personal biases. Ensure that there’s a diverse group of people making decisions at agencies, for example, we talked
about that with policy. And opportunities to partner with philanthropy and other entities to change the trajectory of child welfare.

**TOM OATES [00:59:02]**: It kinda goes back to the vision that we talked about at the beginning. Some of the keywords that I just noticed through that, that I’ve kinda jotted down. And you’ve just talked about a little bit when it comes to walking the talk of incorporating community, culture, collaborative, equity. And starting all, and starting like your vision, starting from a place of love. And that realizing that everybody that you’re working with probably has the same goal in mind as you. Aysha Schomburg, thank you so much for, for your time, for your willingness to share this with us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast and you’ve just mentioned it, so I’ll say it up front, - safe travels. I think we can say that now. And just appreciate you spending the time with us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

**AYSHA E. SCHOMBURG [00:59:55]**: Thank you so much, Tom, it’s been a pleasure.

**TOM OATES [00:59:59]**: So, we mentioned the article Commissioner Schomburg coauthored in Children's Bureau Express. If you go to this episode's webpage over at www.childwelfare.gov, just search podcasts, we’ll have a link to that issue of CBX for you. We'll also have links to some of our other episodes on racial equity and incorporating lived experience throughout Child Welfare. Plus links to resources on community collaboration, racial disproportionality, and cultural competency. Now also, as Commissioner Schomburg mentioned about different state laws regarding neglect, Child Welfare Information Gateway contains a deep database of state statutes. You can review nearly 40 statutes from every state surrounding prevention, foster care, and adoption. And find out what are the current laws in your area and how they compare around the nation.

[01:00:50]: So, hey, if you like what you are hearing, please subscribe to the Information Gateway Podcast via Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher or SoundCloud. We really appreciate the growing number of you that have chosen to be a part of our community. And again, hey, my thanks to Children’s Bureau Associate Commissioner Aysha E. Schomburg for spending the time with us - and you, here, on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I’m Tom Oates. Have a great day.