

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
Reunification TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Mimi Laver, American Bar Association; Scott Trowbridge, Children's Bureau; Chauncey Strong, Strong Training & Consulting, LLC

[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 [00:00:32]: In protecting children with safety and permanency, the policies and language have shifted to recognize most children fare far better with their own family and reunification should be a primary goal for those who experience foster care. But are our actions living up to those policy and language changes? Welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, everyone - Tom Oates here. Now, those shifts in policy stem from data that points to children who return to stable, loving families and homes are more likely to succeed in school and in social settings, maintain connections to siblings and extended family members, along with keeping those connections with traditions and their cultural identity. So, while June is Reunification Month - just like National Adoption Month, National Child Abuse Prevention Month, and National Foster Care Month - the month itself is used to celebrate the work performed all year round. And so, this is a good as time as any to discuss reunification at a deeper level and how to help communities walk the talk a bit better when it comes to reunifying families.

[00:01:44]: Now, if you're not familiar with the American Bar Association's Children on Center and the Law established reunification month more than a decade ago. Mimi Laver helped establish the event and she's one of our guests on this episode. So, for more information, you can visit www.Americanbar.org and search National Reunification Month for their, their reunification heroes, the personal stories of parents, professionals, and youth that the ABA Center on Children and the Law recognizes for their work to keep families together. There's also a number of other resources they have on that page for National Reunification Month over at ABA's website.

[00:02:24]: Scott Trowbridge is also a part of our conversation. Scott is a Child Welfare Program Specialist with the Children's Bureau within the US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. Now, Scott has a deep connection to Reunification Month as his background also includes working with Mimi at the ABA. Scott has a unique perspective of both the federal government and its programs and policies and the private and non-profit sectors as they merge together to support reunification. And we're also joined by Chauncey Strong. Chauncey has nearly 30 years professional experience in child welfare administration, specializing in foster care and adoption training, along with being a caseworker, a manager, and a supervisor. Chauncey Strong is also an alumnus of foster care, being separated from his family when he was five years old. This is a powerhouse trio and we're so happy to have the chance to bring them all together for this conversation. So, let's get right to it. Mimi Laver, Scott Trowbridge, and Chauncey Strong on shifting our actions toward reunification here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

[00:03:36]: Chauncey, Mimi and Scott - guys, I thank you so much for your time and welcome you into the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. And guys, let's just kinda get right to it. You know, reunification is, is clearly been identified as a priority, as the primary prevention goal. But I'd like to get

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into the actual application and ask is reunification really front and center when we start talking about child welfare practice today?

SCOTT TROWBRIDGE [00:04:06]: Well, so like, like you've lead in, you know, next to prevention, reunification is the primary goal in law. And in, in those two outcomes, prevention or reunification, are the main outcomes we get if you've come in contact with the system. So, but I think they're not where we want them to be. And so, a little more on that is we do, we do prevention. So, looking at 2019 data are the ones that are easiest for you to find if you want to look up anything I'm saying here. We have referrals to child protection, like 8 million children involved and 250,000 entered care. And we do reunify. But the reasons to think that it could be faster and a higher percentage, we, you know, we're just under half the cases that reunify and the length of time averages around 20 months. The reasons you would think it might be higher and faster, I think, you know, 64% enter for neglect. Physical and sexual abuse are nowhere near that, they're barely reach the double digits in most places. And neglect's a broad category and there are certainly cases in there that have very challenging safety risks.

[00:05:26]: But when we dig into the data, when we get down to more of a case level, we see too many things that are, are fixable if we had the resources. So, easier said than done. But contextualize that with one in six children in the US live in poverty. And so, I think a question that we always have to ask of ourselves is, are we entangling poverty and neglect and in reunification, are we moving the goal posts once the children are in care.

TOM OATES [00:05:58]: Chauncey, I'm curious to start with you about, you know, where Scott is talking about - you know, the data that tells us the story - but when it comes to reunification in practice and what we're looking for, where are we seeing the biggest gaps? Especially, I know there are going to be gaps in age groups and there's going to be gaps in, in, you know, practice application as well. When it comes to what you've seen, where are those biggest gaps that we see in terms of the desire for reunification and the actual, you know, efforts that lead to it?

CHAUNCEY STRONG [00:06:34]: Thanks, Tom. First of all, glad to be on the podcast with you all, glad to talk about this really, just a great subject, as far as I'm concerned. In terms of reunification, if I think about gaps, there's a number of different things that come up. One would be, I think, Scott, you said it well in terms of sometimes there's a moving of the goal post that the young person came into care for this particular reason, but then you start adding on things to why the child can't go home. And so, right away that becomes a gap because the, the family almost can never reach the goal. The primary reason maybe has been mitigated, there's no issues any longer. But now we've added one more thing, whether it's transportation or whether it's job or whether it's, you know, who is living in the home. But I think by far the biggest gap that I have seen would be the services that are available when young people are removed, services to the family.

[00:07:26]: So, what are the resources that the family will need, the parents will need to have the child returned home? So, whether that's substance abuse services, whether that's housing, transportation, domestic violence services - whatever those services are underlining the issue that the child was removed, again, being careful not to then not add on additional things, right. So, but the issues that, where the child was removed, what is being done to address those issues and more times than not a lot of services are focused on the child, which is where it should be, especially if there's an issue of safety and neglect, it should be focused on the child. But in order for that child to return home - and this is where I think sometimes those of us who have been in foster care, it seems like it's our fault that we've been removed where more times than not, it's not our fault. So, but all the services goes towards us

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versus the services to the family, that the reason I was removed because what was happening in my home and that's where the services also needs to be focused. So, case management specifically for the family so that the children can return home.

MIMI LAVER [00:08:28]: If I could just add, Tom, I think all too often we sometimes in the system put our own maybe middle-class values on families and that's just not okay. Family is family and children want to be with their family. They thrive in their own families. Data shows that children who are removed have worse outcomes than children who are similarly situated that stay at home. And so, I, I think we really need to have sort of a change of hearts and minds about how we think about family. And family are the people that love their children the best and want to raise their children. And when we see families who are living in poverty but there is absolutely no safety risk, children shouldn't be removed. Or if there is a safety risk and we can support the family and have the safety risks mitigated and there are issues such as there's not enough bedrooms in the house or there's not enough beds or there's not a dining room table. And I literally heard that story recently - we need to get beds and a dining room table so that the children can go home because eating at a table compared to eating in the living room is not a safety issue.

[00:09:41]: And so, we really need to support families with what they need, but not more than what they need. Families don't need surveillance. Families don't need regulation. They need to be supported so that they can safely love their children. And I think that's why reunification - getting back to your original question - reunification should be the foundation of our practice and it is hard for me to believe that under half of the children reunify when we know what we know about trauma, we know what we know about children wanting to be with their families and thriving in their families and parents wanting to support those children so that the whole family can flourish in community together.

TOM OATES [00:10:21]: This reminds me of when we were talking before we started recording. You - I believe may have been you, Mimi - had mentioned wanting to even, you know, steal is the wrong word but really adopt - excuse the pun from adopt, Adopt US Kids and National Adoption Month - the phrase, you don't have to be perfect to be a perfect parent. And it's the applications that we provide, you know, hearing the fact that, that you said, you know, the difference between eating dinner in a living room versus eating dinner at the dinner table, if that's your focus and you're clearly not focused on eating dinner with your family versus eating dinner alone or in a place that is just strange. And just even thinking about that, just imagine the anxiety that any young person would go through. But you talked about winning hearts and minds. But it's also some of these things about, like, hey, let's establish the guidelines, establish the policies, or really kind of get this out in the open and talk about changing in practice. So, I'll open this up to the three of you and ask, so, what's being done then, as we take a look at this from a federal, from a national level to support this shift toward, you know, stressing reunification within child welfare practice?

SCOTT TROWBRIDGE [00:11:39]: Yeah, well, it relates of course, to the, the reasons to focus on it. And I think the continuing focus on safety is, is one of the things that you see at a federal, state level. And the statute hinges on safety for these decisions we're talking about. And again, like, like Mimi, like we were all saying about poverty isn't itself unsafe. We have biases there and so it goes, it goes, you know, it goes to the decision-making that we bring to it. And then we have the resource issue. But the, I think part of the frame in understanding that is thinking of, think of the model of foster care, not of we're going to keep the child in foster care until we can send them home and trust that everything's going to be stable. You know, that's another sort of way that the goal posts get moved and, you know, you can understand that, that feeling and rationale. But you have to think of foster care as getting the child home when we

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put the, we can put the fire out. And that's long before we're feeling like the fire is not going to re-ignite without services. We get the child back home and then we continue to work with the family once the immediate fire is out so that we can feel comfortable that it's not going to reignite again, but that can be done intact with a lot of our cases, a lot more than from, you know, when we dig into the data than we think we're at.

[00:13:04]: And another one - and, you know, I'll just kick this off as a topic and maybe pitch it to Mimi - but strengthening legal representation. I just, it's before law school, I worked for a child welfare agency and the ask of the agency to come in there and make decisions about best interests, trying to serve the whole family, you sort of have multiple clients. With all the best training and the best intentions., you are still substituting your judgment and your expertise for the expertise and the knowledge of the family and the community. And so, there's a lot of power in that legal representation to make sure we're centering the voice of the youth and the parents. There's power to have that debate about reasonable efforts and in case-by-case basis. So, we can all make the best decisions.

MIMI LAVER [00:13:56]: Well, Scott and Tom, I'm so happy that Scott raised legal representation and I was a little bit surprised that he didn't mention what the federal government has done to support high-quality legal representation. So, I'm going to share a little bit about that and talk about the relevance of high-quality legal representation in reunification. And it is, I think, an exciting time to be a lawyer who wants to do the best possible work to lift up the voices of youth and parents. And in part that's because the federal government is now allowing states for the first time to draw down federal dollars for legal representation. And this is a huge move that happened a couple of years ago. And states are rolling that out and trying their hardest to figure out how to make it happen. I think we now have about half of the states working on pulling down that money and hopefully other states will follow suit.

[00:14:51]: But it means that the power imbalance between that child welfare agencies, legal representation, and that of the child and the parents can now be more equalized, that we now have resources to put into what I call high-quality legal representation, it's a term that many of us are using. But if you're not a lawyer and you have never heard that term, it might sound like jargon. And so, I want to talk for a minute about what we mean when we all say high quality legal representation. We mean lawyers who are paid a reasonable amount of money so that they can specialize or really focus on representing parents and children. We mean lawyers who have a caseload that's reasonable so that they have time to work outside of the courtroom with their clients. We also mean - what, another jargon term - multidisciplinary legal representation, but teams of lawyers, social workers, and people with lived experience to provide holistic representation for parents and children. And we're finding - and there again, is research to show that when families have, when parents have that kind of representation - outcomes for their children improved drastically. So, children return home and they return home sooner and they return home just as safely as if the children stayed in care longer. So, legal representation is a key because it really provides the parent the opportunity to be supported in child welfare agency meetings, in courts, and to access what they need, what services they actually need.

[00:16:22]: Another piece of what Scott was saying is the Family First legislation that allows reunification services to occur for 12 months after the child has returned. That is a shift in the amount of time that parents can access the services they need. It doesn't mean that all parents need services for that long, but the child welfare agency can access, again, resources that can help support families for a year after they return. And so, like Scott was saying, we could send children home when it's safe to do so, but still be able to support the family and not worry that something is going to happen when, when they're not engaged with the system. And, those services can be provided in community. It doesn't need to be

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happen, happening just by the child welfare agency where there may be some trust issues. Those services can be provided in the communities that families live. Going back to legal representation for a minute - another amazing thing that's happening is what people are calling pre-petition or pre-removal legal representation. And that goes to prevention, but I think is part of the continuum that we're talking about today of giving a parent a lawyer before the child's removed to handle those ancillary issues that we've been talking about - the housing issues, the education issues, the domestic violence issues - so that the child doesn't need to be removed because we're mitigating the safety issue.

[00:17:45]: And so, for a long time, we lawyers have been talking about our own benefit maybe a little too much, but I think we are in a time now where, where courts and child welfare agencies and lawyers are working together as a full system to support families, not remove families when they don't need to be, but support them if they needed to have a separation, you can get those children home quicker. We're all taking our responsibility as a community together. And that is pretty exciting.

CHAUNCEY STRONG [00:18:19]: Mimi had just said, I'll just say again what we talk about this topic, the more excited I get about it. I think, I just love what you talked about and part of it is that working together. And a lot of times what happens in systems is that when we're not working together, you know, the children and families are suffering because we're fighting against each other even though we have many of the same goals. I just wanted to touch on a little bit, even from a state level what's happening. And I was so excited to find out, I've always heard about foster care manager, I've always heard of an adoption manager and even kinship care or relative care manager. More recently, we've heard of two states now who actually have - in Georgia it's called a reunification director, in Oregon it's called a reunification program manager. And when I first heard about it, I just was, just overjoyed to hear that we're now saying that reunification, while it is a part of foster care, it needs the same level of attention that our foster care needs as well as our adoption needs.

[00:19:16]: And so, you know, talking to them - and you'll see more of that on the reunification website you'll be getting, you can find more information about both of those positions, specifically, we're highlighting the Oregon reunification program manager, where they're putting services and they're putting staff in specifically to talk about how do we help young people reunify? How do we help them when they, when they do reunify successfully stay in the home. And I think if you don't put attention to it, it might not get done. If it's - what is that saying - if it's everybody's responsibility, then nobody's responsible. But if you make it very specific that these, these program managers, these supervisors, these workers will focus on reunification, you have a much better chance. So, as someone who's worked in the state and just to hear that, knowing that that's out there, that's exciting to know and I think they will have a better chance of reunifying some of our young people with positions like that in place.

MIMI LAVER [00:20:15]: Thank, Chauncy. I am so excited about what's happening in Oregon and Georgia also. But I wanted to comment - something you said just made me think that maybe I misspoke a little bit. That, I agree with you that it's really important that the whole community is working together. And, and I, I think that we all need to take responsibility for supporting families. I think we really need to be lifting up the voices of people with lived experience, meaning parents and youth and kinship providers. But I also want to remind people that we are in an adversarial system for a reason. And sometimes not everybody's going to get along. And I think that's okay too, right. I think that lawyers and their teams can play a role in holding child welfare agencies accountable. Or a child's attorney can help support a parent and, and work with the parents attorney. And sometimes they'll clash, and that's okay if everybody is keeping their eye on the prize of keeping families together. And so, I don't want any of my lawyer colleagues out in the country saying, Mimi, do you think collaboration means we all have to get along all

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of the time, which sometimes that's what that c word stands for in people's minds. And that's not what it means. It means that on a system level we're all going to work as a team to figure out the best policies and practices, but that case-by-case, if we need to do a little bit of adversarial advocating, that's okay to get the clients what they really need for their families.

TOM OATES [00:21:48]: Scott, go ahead.

SCOTT TROWBRIDGE [00:21:50]: So, that also just reminds me of another thing that we're doing to support in all of this is there's going to come out very soon a very in-depth package looking at all the research done on hearing quality. So, some of this, you know, the way this gets operationalized is that if we go into court and there is, there are some different perspectives that need to be digested and a decision has to be made, you know, are some of, the basics of you know, is there enough time to hear from all the parties for the judge to make a good informed decision to, to upstream things of the preparation and the judges training and the judges, you know, the, the knowledge or backgrounds that they bring. So, that's something that's gonna come out soon and it's, it's an area where we've, we've had a lot of research, but it hasn't been sort of packaged as a conceptual model, as a compendium. So, that's another way we're trying to support, and that ties into a lot, all the different things we've talked about from the safety decision-making to the involving a wider net of people on the legal teams and on the agency teams.

TOM OATES [00:23:07]: It's, you guys bring up, and thank you guys for really adding the legal perspective when it comes to also collaboration because there is so much and I'll make sure to on this episode's webpage - head on over to childwelfare.gov - of course, will have links to National Reunification Month over from the American Bar Association. And we'll also have a link - if you, if you talk about collaboration - with the three of you guys and a recent webinar you guys had about while focusing on National Reunification Month, it really supports those foster care managers in taking a look at, well, what do you do not only during the month, but how do you extend it and how do you kind of make it front and center in folks' minds. Also, when you discussed collaboration, that there is also collaboration happening from the foster parent and birth parent side of things where you're seeing caseworkers or advocates, you know, parent partners working together to kind of maybe break down that adversarial role to say, hey, you know, the goal of this foster parent isn't to take your children away from you, but to work with you or to get, you know, as you get ready, we'll get ready and everybody's goal is the same. And that's happening out in California, so, there's a couple of publications, there's actually a recent podcast we did in focusing on the birth parent/foster relationship and the mentor-ship that happens. So, head on over childwelfare.gov and on this episode's webpage we'll have links to all of that.

MIMI LAVER [00:24:39]: So, Tom, I want to add a couple things because I think we're having a great conversation about reunification, but I think we really need to be explicit about who are the families that we're talking about. We've been talking around it a little bit. But we all know that, that black, brown and indigenous families are over-represented in our child welfare system, that we don't honor the cultures that these families come from historically. And even currently, I don't think that we do a great job of including the elders of the tribal communities in child welfare and decision-making. I don't think that we give enough credence necessarily to the supports that families have in their extended family. And I know we've talked a little bit about that. But I, you know, I think that the service providers and supports, to use Scott's words, that are in black and brown communities can be, we can shine a spotlight on them. And they should be there to support the families.

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[00:25:43]: And we really need to acknowledge that we all have a lot of work to do from a race equity lens to ensure that we no longer make the decisions that we've been making historically to remove more black, brown and indigenous children and to keep them in foster care longer because of the way we view their families. And I just, you know, as we're celebrating reunifications, we also just want to be sure that we're not causing separation unnecessarily and we are celebrating the reunifications that happen as quickly as possible for the children who are over-represented in our community, in our system.

SCOTT TROWBRIDGE [00:26:23]: This, this is really an area where we can learn from child welfare practice in tribal communities. And I think they're, they're often farther along in conceptualizing culture as protective factor and cultural events and the cultural connectedness of, you know, broader community in, in problem-solving. And, you know, you see this if you, if you do any work around Indian Child Welfare Act cases or just in cases that originate in the tribal court or child welfare system.

CHAUNCEY STRONG [00:26:57]: That's one of the things I want to make sure that I add into this conversation, is the whole issue around, you know, start thinking about who are the young people that are reunifying. So, you, then you go back and you say, well, we already know there's an overrepresentation of people of color, of children of color in the system. But are they actually the ones reunifying? Some of the data showed that no, even though they're over-represented, when you look at young people - and especially if you look at, you know, and I'm very well be real specific here, young men of color who come in at 13, 14, 15 they are on a on a track that's around independent living and aging out of the foster care system. They're, you know, if you look at that, that's a population of people that say, okay, they're too old to be, to go back home or to be adopted, or they're too aggressive, or they've been in these residential settings. And so, you start looking at that, young, young men of color especially are not going home, are not being reunified. So, you know, we do a disservice in a lot of ways if we don't talk about that issue and to continue to highlight we want all young people to return home. And maybe if there needs to be some specific focus on children of color to make sure that we're not doing something just - even unintentionally, because I always feel that I want to believe the good in man, right? That it's not that we're intentionally doing things to hurt people.

[00:28:20]: Now there are some people who are, but the majority of us are not intentionally doing it, but even unintentional harm is still harm. And so, we still need to go back and making sure that, you know, our young people of color don't automatically get - and in foster care, we say this a lot as alumni - the label that's put on us right away, unadoptable, we can't be returned home too aggressive. All those things, and the majority of the time it's young people of color, and specifically young men of color. So, you know, I think it's important that we continue to wave that banner, continue to shine a spotlight on that that's going to be important for us, that if we're going to truly have, reach reunification. And going back to the numbers, as the numbers that we should have them, we need to look at the people who are, the young people who are in care the most and the longus, and that's those of color. And so, I'm just glad that we, we're not going to miss that point in this webinar, so.

TOM OATES [00:29:14]: Yeah, thank you guys for, for, for taking us down a path that we need to continue to, to walk and bring that to the forefront of these conversations. I want to get back toward some of the policies and processes. And so, Scott, you know, how are those - maybe for some jurisdictions, some states - but how are those current systems set up in a way that may not be the best to support reunification?

SCOTT TROWBRIDGE [00:29:42]: So, we hinted at this before, but again, I think we have to remember that we have mandatory reporters. And the agency, if you look at reasonable efforts in a way, is a mandatory supporter. But for some things, what you really need is a network of service providers. And those service providers are not under that same statutory scheme where they're going to lose funding if they don't provide a service. I don't want to sound pessimistic, but I think one of your other questions comes, comes back to why, you know, I don't, I don't want that to be a barrier when you think about that. But another, just another follow up on, you know, the way, the way systems are set up right now that, you know, Mimi had already addressed is, you know, the IV-E legal representation option that more states and a couple tribes have, have already billed for and invoiced for, and many more are in the process of. The policies, and so more of the process, a lot of the attorney systems are, are, you know, very county based and they can, you know, be somewhat isolated and not have this network of support or supervision or, you know, training set up.

[00:30:55]: So, you know, of course, we do fund some things for that, for the Court Improvement Program and the IV-E legal rep can take care of a lot of that day-to-day high-quality legal representation. But until, until that option is really hitting full steam, that's another way processes are not set up to really have the support or the pay for attorneys or the time for work out of court to support this. And I mean, the other thing that it makes me think of also is sort of, you know, while the IV-E legal rep can support all the things connected to that IV-E process directly, another thing we're seeing with the court improvement programs piloting is more holistic, like representation. And so, what I mean by that is you're looking outside the tertiary things that - landlord, tenant, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, special ed appeals, for example - that, that affect the child welfare case outcomes but might not be directly. So, that's something that seemed very new ten years ago and then we're seeing it in a lot of places now and you'll see IPs are supporting that and other states and counties are supporting that, tribes are looking at that, too.

TOM OATES [00:32:09]: So, Scott, to put on a bit of a, you know, you mentioned that there is some pessimism in that but, if it's okay - and Mimi I'll throw this to you to talk maybe a bit more about the optimistic side. And because we do know that, you know, there are communities that are making moves toward reunification, even in the light of, of our continued social distancing and dealing with a pandemic. So, I'd love to give you the opportunity to think about, you know, for those communities that want to push more or that want to make that mind shift or that want to, you know, look at their policies and say, hey, what do we need to do differently - are there any examples that you've seen where communities are making moves toward reunification and seeing improvements?

[00:32:53]: Sure. I like to be the optimist. So, I think there's two practice areas beyond the legal rep - and believe me, legal rep is one of my passions. And, but I think in states that are looking really concretely at their visitation policy and at their resource parent policy, they are starting to see some shifts. And again, in addition to all the court work. And, Tom, a few minutes ago, you were talking about foster parents and parents working together and, in my mind, the places that are doing it well and are shifting to what they're calling resource parents as caregivers, I think that shouldn't just be a semantic change. I think that's really an important change of process and policy and practice is really empowering caregivers - whether they're kin caregivers or stranger caregivers - to be resources for the whole family and have the parents over for birthday parties and include the parents in the dental appointments for the children and the education meetings. And of course, parents have the right to do those things, but all too often they're cancelled out of the child's relationship and the foster parent takes over. But I think in those communities - and you mentioned California, I want to think about Washington and a number of other places. And again, on the Reunification Month Website, we highlight that resource parent

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practice. People who really love the kids but are there to support the whole family, I think that's a great practice shift.

[00:34:34]: And then family time, often called visitation, is a real make or break for reunification. If a system continues with the old way of thinking where you get one hour every other week to see each other in a sterile room - and that of course, is pre-pandemic - you're not going to have great reunification outcomes. But if you think more broadly like Georgia has, Georgia changed their statute actually to make unsupervised visitation the default. Now, does that happen in every case? No, there are times where there may be a safety reason that the parent and the child need someone to supervise them. But in general, that idea of going to an Unsupervised, go to a park, go to McDonald's, go wherever the child likes a few times a week, because you don't need supervision. And then add in the child, the parent getting to go see the child's extracurricular activities and again, the medical appointments and those kinds of things, you're now mimicking family life. You could have visitation or family time in places that the kids and the parents like to do things. At a bowling alley or during a church service or what have you, but it's really important that they have contact and that the siblings are all together with the parent and each other. And there are communities around the country that are focusing on not having visitation homes.

[00:36:02]: Now the pandemic, of course, threw a whole monkey wrench into this idea of in-person visitation, in some places appropriately so, but I think now we're falling back on this idea that virtual contact is the same as visitation. And now I'm not going to be an optimist. That's not true, it is not true. Virtual contact is just that it's contact and it's a way for parents and children to stay connected. And the optimist in me hopes that post-pandemic, we will hold on to that virtual contact so that, for example, parents can read their children a bedtime story every night virtually. But that doesn't mean that they don't see each other a couple times a week. Because again, we know from research that high-quality visitation is a huge marker of safe reunification. So, those are two practices and policies that are intertwined and I think really important for reunification that places are, some places are doing well, but there's lots of room for improvement. And I hope folks will really focus on those two areas.

SCOTT TROWBRIDGE [00:37:08]: Yeah, two, two grants that really speak to Mimi's first point as, that reminded to mention are we have the Center for Excellence in Foster Family Development and that's implementing a model program for the support of resource families that she was mentioning to work closely with birth families for reunification. And also, the Improving Child Welfare Through Investing in Families grant is, has some of those similar outcome goals, but is focusing on kinship preparation and kinship support for reunification.

TOM OATES [00:37:42]: Scott, thank you. And these are, you know, clearly practice implementation implications that somebody can do, you know, I, I love the idea of really treating virtual visitation as supplemental as in you, you have your regular face-to-face, but here's a way we can add to it where it's, it's quick to do I mean, 15 minutes with your phone in your hand and you can be anywhere. So, it can be just work, right when you're done with work or right before somebody goes to bed. Chauncey, there's also an approach of kind of opening your eyes and mind to thinking what can we do, you know, and so I'm curious to your thoughts on, you know, kind of that, those questions that maybe caseworkers or managers need to ask themselves to maybe, you know, open their minds when approaching foster care and making sure reunification is the goal.

CHAUNCEY STRONG [00:38:34]: Yeah. I think that's a great question, Tom. If you don't mind, I just want to share a little bit as I get into, sort of the mindset. So, I've been working in child welfare for 26 years.

And so, 26 years to either foster care, adoption, in-home services. And I don't mean like I took a break and then - no, 26 straight years of doing this. I've also, I was in foster care myself. I was adopted out of the foster care system. And to this day, I'm still reconnecting with birth families, with my, with my birth family, right? So, but when I think about when I started 26 years ago, I can't tell you I knew how to spell reunification, much less what's working on reunification. It just was not what we were doing back then. And that's not a fault of anybody that I was working with or any program. It was just not the focus. And so over time, there has been a shift in people's mindset about reunification. And I think for me - and I build on this a lot when I do a lot of trainings around, around this topic - I think the biggest shift is the belief that young people can go home. And that they should go home when it's safe to do so. And so, I think if we get, we got to really think about our mindset. What do we actually believe about our young people and their ability to go home?

[00:39:52]: And I focus on our older youth. Because there's absolutely a mindset that once you come into care, at a certain age, you're probably going to age out of foster care, meaning you're going to turn 18 or 21 and just leave the foster care system versus ever having a chance to go back home. I do a lot of training on this. And so, the topic that, the saying that I use quite a bit is that you work to your level of belief. And if you don't believe a young person can go home, they probably won't go home under your watch. If the, if the judge doesn't make the young person go home or the parent or the worker or the supervisor, more than likely they're going to be right because they're not even going to work to a level that's going to make it successful for that child to go home. So, you really do have to change the belief and start believing that the children can go home. Now, how do we make that happen?

[00:40:43]: Will that happen in every case because you believe? I'm not going to say that, but you have a much better chance if you believe it actually can happen. And so, some of it is just about the power, I believe, the power of belief and then looking at how do you move those services into place. And so, I think one of the things that, you know, that's a gapping you're seeing more and more of that. The only other piece I would throw in there that there needs to be a shift in terms of the mindset is that - and I say this all the time, again, 26 years I have been to some awesome adoption celebrations. I mean, some of the best you've ever seen and I and I'm an adoptee, yes, let's celebrate that. I've been to some of the best foster care celebrations, where we celebrate our resource parents, right. And that's awesome. I would love to continue, and with their going around across the country and I want to see more reunification celebrations, as well. When young people go home and it's the first goal typically for most kids coming into care, we ought to celebrate that just like we celebrate anything else. I think that that's a mindset that not only are young people going home, we're celebrating that because we know how difficult it can be for young people to return home. So, those things fill, you know, the social worker in me that's a little touchy-feely piece of it. But I think that's important to have the right mindset, that they can go home and they should go home with the, you know, we put the services in place and then when they go celebrate and recognize the hard work that was put in place by the parents, by their family, by everybody involved for these children to reunify.

TOM OATES [00:42:16]: So, let me pull on that for a little while and, Scott, go ahead.

SCOTT TROWBRIDGE [00:42:19]: Yeah, something you said, Chauncey reminded me - I was talking to Judge Maldonado, who is the judge at Little Traverse Bay Bands, earlier this week and she said something so well, that's, that I hadn't articulated this well myself, I thought, and it's that children are not like potted plants and sometimes we have this idea that we can take them from a shady spot and put them in a sunny spot and they're going to thrive. And, humans just don't work that way. We adapt

to imperfect situations and our psychological roots are just, are very hard to shift. And I just loved the way she said that, so, I wanted to throw that in in response.

TOM OATES [00:42:55]: Appreciate that, Scott. Because it is that mindset of like - and that's really good, that gets back to what everybody was saying about the idea of what somebody's version of, of safety, a dinner table versus the family that's eating dinner together, right? It's, it's repotting the plant. Chauncey, I want to follow up though, when you, you know, yes, mindset and belief are huge because it just won't open up any opportunities, you won't see them. So, let's talk about, like, the actual execution, right? So, somebody recognizes and you said, you know, working toward reunification. Well, it is work. So, I'd love to get your sense from what you've seen of those common pathways to reunification that communities can implement. Because we are, at times, talking about services and programs and instead of just focusing on the child, but focusing on the community, on the family, as well. What are you seeing that's working?

CHAUNCEY STRONG [00:43:53]: Yeah, I want to go back and, again, this really shows to me when you think about the consistency and what we're talking about - you know, Mimi already talked about this a little bit - but I really want to highlight again this whole piece about resource parents and families of origin or birth parents working together. In Virginia, we did something what we called bridging the gap. And then using icebreakers, which was the first-time families would work together. And specifically, you know, a lot of that work came from Denise Goodman's work and Annie E. Casey's work on this work. And we really started an initiative in Virginia - starting in Northern Virginia - where it was just the norm for these families to meet each other. Just, you know, just to give a little shout out to a couple of places that are really that's taking off. I know Mimi mentioned California, but, you know, in Virginia, in Maryland they're doing some work around that. New Mexico, they're doing some work, in West Virginia's even had some work done around these icebreaker meetings.

[00:44:50]: So, it's, there's a gap between the two parents. And more times than not, it is unintentional, but we have set them up to be almost enemies of each other. It's not intentional, I don't think it's been any ill will, but you know, you know, a lot of times even the language that we use - and, and again, this is no knock on this language for people that resonate with - you know, we call our resource parents heroes and they're, they're heroes and they're saving their children. And then you gotta keep thinking, okay, if they're the heroes, then who is the villain in that situation. And, and again, it's not intentional, but we almost have set them up. You know, and if they're heroes, who are they, who are they saving them from? What are they saving them from? I think there is a recruitment mindset that we need to be thinking about, where we think about, you know, what can be done. We need to think about the messages that we are asking for our resource parents. That they are resource parents, right? And that our first goal is not for the little, cute five-year-old or four-year-old or three-year-old to be adopted out of the foster care system. That's not our goal. Our first goal is for this child to be returned home safely and your role is to try to help where appropriate to work with that family to make that happen. So, when you start talking about our partnership and when you start talking about collaboration and working better together, that needs to be part of our recruitment message for our families. And I think right away then you will see, will continue to see differences.

[00:46:12]: And, again, there are some states that are doing a great job with it. And then of course, Mimi mentioned this and I will reiterate this again, but the whole visitation time, family time, people call it different things, but we're saying quality time together can make all the difference in the world. The last thing, most recently I heard of things what they call Comfort Calls - the first time the child comes into care, there's a call between the parent and the, and the resource parent that gives some comfort to

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where that child is and that their child is safe and then that leads you to icebreaker meetings. So, there's a nice progression about, again, encouraging and really strongly suggesting that these families work together. And that has to start with even the mindset on who are we recruiting to be resource parents so that they know that's what it's really about. We're trying to make sure young people can return home safely when they can do so and you have a role in doing that.

TOM OATES [00:47:07]: Yeah, you really, you're setting the goal setting with the professionals, with birth parents and resource parents. And, and it is this, you know, it is a triumvirate and they are in a sense, working together whether they're all in the same room or not. So, Mimi, let me, let's talk about that, that trio, right, the, the parents and the professionals and thinking about those agencies that want to do more, want to be able to kind of structure this. And if there are any tools out there that are for parents or tools for professionals in helping support kind of working toward reunification from day one.

MIMI LAVER [00:47:48]: Sure. And I really love what Chauncey was just saying about the heroes and the villains and thinking about the us versus them. And part of it is really realizing that reunification, yes, it's foundational and yes, it's part of our law. But, it's also what's right, it's what makes the most sense for children and families. And so, when we set up resource or foster parents to think of the family of origin is them, then we're setting them up to not want to work together. But as folks have worked really hard - and I'll point out, the birth parent national network has new tools on, for resource parents and parents working together. And the BPNN, as they're known, has brought together with, in partnership with Casey Family Programs and others, they've brought together groups of resource parents and groups of parents to really work through the hard parts of this. What does it mean to overcome that us/them mentality? What does it mean for a parent to say somebody else is caring for my child and I need to trust them. And how could you possibly trust them if you don't know who they are?

[00:49:03]: And from the resource parent point of view, how do you lift up and honor the parent if you don't know who they are? And so, they've put together tools and they've done webinars. And on our website we have a link to one of the webinars, but there's been many of them really talking through the nitty-gritty, not just the Pollyanna up in the sky part, but how do you do the hard work of connecting families? Another place to look for tools is on our Family Justice Initiative website, FJI. The Family Justice Initiative, the goal of that is that all parents and all children will have high-quality legal representation when courts are making decisions about their families. And so, we have lots of tools for families and for lawyers related to COVID, related to high quality legal representation and what it looks like and what it, what is required to make that actually happen in communities. And at the beginning of the pandemic - and, and there's an article on the FJI website about this - a number of communities got together, their parents lawyers, their children's lawyers, their agencies, and their courts. And they looked at the list of children that were in foster care to say, who could we get home right away. We know that this pandemic is going to disrupt lives. How can we get some children home right away and not worry about the trial home visit or the three extra overnight visits that were in the case plan.

[00:50:33]: And in these communities they sent home many, many, many children. And so, I, I urge an ongoing analysis by communities of the list of cases that you're holding onto for just that one more visit or that one more, is, are you really having safety concerns? And if not, return home the children. We know that it can happen, we did it in an emergency and now that we're starting to come out of the pandemic - of course we're not totally out - but as we're coming out, this serves as, I think, another opportunity, so just do some good digging in on the families that you're serving, to think about whose children can return home right away to do the emotional work that needs to happen as people are reunited in this crazy time.

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TOM OATES [00:51:21]: Thanks, Mimi. And I'll make sure that if you head, again to this, this episode's webpage we'll have links to the FJI and the Birth Parent National Network to help folks access those tools that you were talking about. Before we wrap up, Scott, I want to bring back in the idea of, you know, for those folks in higher administration within child welfare agencies, if you had an opportunity to sit down with them and just, you know, what would you think in terms of either what's out there or where this conversation and others are going for guidance for those jurisdictions and policymakers on, maybe, what they should take and how that may differ from current approaches toward helping reunify families.

SCOTT TROWBRIDGE [00:52:07]: Well, I'm going to twist your question because I do have that opportunity and I do do that - but only a little bit - to say, you know, going back to where I said I might, maybe, I don't want to come off as pessimistic, but I was trying to be responsive to your prior question is again about the services or supports that are needed when there, when there is a barrier that to get to that point of safety. We support a lot of this at Children's Bureau and, but more of that is at the state level. And we work on all these things we've talked about. But let me twist your question to say nothing's stopping you at the county level. Again, you have the mandatory supporters that need this network of supports. But don't assume that those service providers know, tell them, you know, we are traumatizing families because of lack or delays in services. Reassess priorities as a team. Another stat that troubles me is 10% of our cases came in in 2019 data for housing related issues. And you don't even have to do the math. I mean, if we're putting a kid in foster care, traumatizing a family over housing, even taking all of the humanity out of it, the, the, the amount of cost, you know, we're putting on the system versus assistance for housing is, it's not even close. You don't even have to, you could do a cost benefit, but it's not close.

[00:53:39]: You know, another - organize around your data is, is one way to start and, you know, another one that comes up a lot is substance abuse, but then, you know, in a lot of places, we know it's opioids and we know there's medically assisted treatment. And yet I think we see anecdote after anecdote of ignoring the science around the medical assisted treatment and really, you know, going for this, this outdated approach to that. I said services and supports because I, you know, because it's not just services sometimes. You know, for one example is social isolation is sort of, it's a predictor and it's something that, you know, we have this adage - it takes a village to raise a child - and you think about, what would I do if I have an emergency and my sister lives down the road and she's a safe person, school teacher and my friend lives a few miles away and, you know, I have in-laws and everybody within emergency distance to get to me. And we have a lot of families that, in our system that made one mistake but didn't have that network to mitigate it. So, sometimes we have to build those villages around, whether, you know, we have relatives or fictive kin for placements, but they can do so much more.

[00:55:04]: And if you don't have those, maybe it's a faith community. Maybe it's just neighborhood. You know, thinking about the family is like that they have to be independent is not the reality for most of us and it's not a reality we should pose on other people. The other one is to stop listening to people like me - and I'm joking, but I'm not joking. I've been involved in the system professionally since, since the nineties. And if I have anything useful to say, most of the time it's because I've never stopped listening to people with lived expertise and experience in the system. And, you know, that operates on an individual case level and that operates on a systemic level. And in both of those, we are, we need to work to improve, you know, listening, we've already mentioned legal rep, representation as an avenue for that. But in an individual case level, you know, really listening and setting up an empowering, preparing youth and parents to, to use our voices and to, to share their expertise of their needs. But at a

systemic level we're, we have I think long and there's always going to be a place for it - surveys, focus groups to make sure we're, we're keeping the pulse. But we're also having this shift and we're engaged in the shift toward youth and parents with lived expertise on decision-making, the roundtables, and, you know, being part of the workforce. Because to quote one young adult consultant Caleb Powell, or to paraphrase - because I won't get it perfect - is the people that are closest to the issues are the closest understand them and to come up with solutions, but often don't have the power. So, we can change that. That's not something, there's nothing stopping us from doing that. And I mentioned some other grants and, you know, a lot of those, those grants - a third one is the Quality Improvement Center on Family-centered Reunification. That's another one that really builds in that youth and family voice, as well as the first two I mentioned. And that one's looking at holistic family centered reunification services and supports.

CHAUNCEY STRONG [00:57:27]: Yeah, Scott, if I could just add on. I appreciate what you just said in terms of again, listening to people with lived experience. I use the language alumni as myself, a person who has been in the foster care system. So, you know, just to build on that more and more and over time you see this happening more and more and I do, engagement of those of us who've been in the system can only improve what we're doing because you're hearing from the people within lived experience. And I always make a distinction in not that we're necessarily, I'm an expert in child welfare because I've been in foster care, but I have expertise and experience about my own life and what happened that you can't get anywhere else. You can't read this in the book and get this that there is an expertise that I have just based on my own lived experience. And then you have those of us who have that and some odd years in child welfare. So, those voices are really important and over the years I have heard it over and over again and you see it in, it's in several studies that talk about this, that young people want to go home. If they can go home, they want to. Most young people are not volunteering to stay in foster care - no, if they can go home, they want to go home or at least, and if it's not home, adopted out of the foster care system.

[00:58:39]: And so, over the years, I've seen that over and over again. In fact, there's several studies that talk about - and in fact, if you're a good social worker, you know this - kids who leave care, whether it's a formal reunification, well, when they turn 18, guess where they go, they go back home or they go to a relative because that is family. And sometimes, there's a quote that says sometimes we don't even know why we want to be with our family, it might be dysfunctional, it might be, but it is still our family. It's our right to be with them and we want to be with them. And so, where we can continue to listen to the voice of young people who have been in the foster care system, lived experience, foster parents, resource parents, kinship caregivers - that's going to be the way to move in the future and I think that's happening more and more. So, I appreciate just being, just even involved in this conversation based on someone with lived experience - who was adopted by the way. Somebody said weren't you adopted? What about this reunification stuff? I said, first of all, I'm about young people not living in the foster care system and whatever way they can leave foster care, they should and we should always look at reunification first. That should be our first goal and it is our first goal. So, why not look at that? So, even as an adoptee, I'm supporting reunification 110%, as well. So, I just appreciate an opportunity to be a part of this podcast.

TOM OATES [01:00:00]: And thank you guys, as well. And it's a conversation that will continue. We know we're going to be having other episodes down the road looking at, you know, executing reunification, you know, even at the, at the jurisdiction level, even at the, at the grantee level as well. So, it's conversation that will continue, but for now, at least for this part - Mimi Laver, Scott Trowbridge, Chauncey Strong, thank you guys so much for not only your work together that we know continues in

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other areas, but focuses folks on helping to strengthen those families and reunify. And, as Chauncey said, you know, kids want to be home. And so, I appreciate you guys for not only the work you've been doing for decades, but also spending time with us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

[01:00:52]: If you head over to this episode's webpage we'll have a number of links - both to Information Gateway resources surrounding reunification, including working with parents. And this includes parents in many different situations, such as recovering from substance use, dealing with health issues, parents who are incarcerated or parents affected by domestic abuse, along with resources for families themselves working toward reunification. We will also link you out to the Reunification Month website from the American Bar Association, which has plenty of stories, as we mentioned at the beginning of the episode, that you can share with families and also tools for professionals, as well. We'll also have a link to the All in for Reunification 2021 webinar for foster care managers about Reunification Month and the importance of honoring families in their states and professionals who assisted them in reunifying families. Now the webinar features our three guests - Chauncey Strong, Scott Trowbridge, and Mimi Laver. And while Reunification Month, again, is June and a lot of the discussion focuses around Reunification Month, the actions to make reunification a goal, along with promoting and highlighting reunification is a yearlong - and frankly, lifelong - activity.

[01:02:09]: A reminder to please subscribe to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud, and Stitcher. We always appreciate your five-star reviews. But most importantly, we appreciate your time, your willingness, and your energy towards strengthening families. Of course, you can head on over to www.childwelfare.gov and visit Information Gateway for the best practices, reports, data, information for families - all surrounding foster care, adoption, reunification, and the prevention of abuse and neglect. So, if you're a professional in the field looking for something in particular or you have an interest in foster care or adoption, you can also reach out to our information support services team at info@childwelfare.gov. So, look out for future episodes focusing on reunification in practice. But that is it for now. Thanks so much for listening to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. I'm Tom Oates. Have a great day.

FEMALE NARRATOR [01:03:12]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at www.childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.