

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
Engaging Fathers – Putting Lessons into Practice Part 2 TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Angela Parks-Pyles, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services; Alan-Michael Graves, Good Plus Foundation

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

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

TOM OATES [00:00:31]: Welcome back to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast, Tom Oates. Glad to be with you again and glad to continue our series, sharing some practical guidance and strategies to improve our child welfare agencies incorporate fathers and paternal families into their case work. What we're doing in this series is sharing the strategies and experiences from different jurisdictions that participated in the Fathers and Continuous Learning and Child Welfare project. Now, in mid-2019, the project implemented a Breakthrough Series Collaborative, otherwise known as a BSC. And that's a method designed to support continuous learning by testing and spreading promising practices to improve outcomes on a particular topic. Now in this case, of course, the BSC focused on improving placement stability and permanency outcomes for children by engaging their fathers and paternal relatives more. Now, I really enjoyed this conversation with key members of the team from Los Angeles County. Now, you'll hear their passion clearly in our discussion. But what struck me as the most interesting was the depth of the relationship between LA County's Department of Children and Family Services and the community organizations that they partner with. Now, it's no surprise the effort to improve father engagement was taken seriously. But the shared commitment to challenge the norm and challenge each other - and you'll hear the term intentionally and unapologetically used often - it's that commitment that really shined in the conversation.

[00:02:09]: So, we're joined by Angela Parks-Pyles, Deputy Director for contract services with LA County's Department of Children and Family Services. Angela was a previous regional director with the department and brings around 30 years experience in child welfare. Also, Dr. Alan-Michael Graves, National Program Director of the Good Plus Foundation, which is a 20-year-old goods and services provider for families in New York City and LA. And that has applied a greater focus unintentionally, including fathers over the past decade. Now, while we get into some of the strategies to change both the processes and tools and mindsets within the child welfare system, I want you to pay attention to how the community was a cornerstone for change, not just a member of the team there to check a box for participation in BSC. You will also hear Angela and Alan-Michael's stories about the positive outcomes that they're seeing. Key takeaways for success. And what they would do differently if they were to embark on the journey to improve fatherhood engagement all over again. It's just a great conversation that I'm so happy you're able to listen to - Angela Parks-Pyles and Dr. Alan-Michael Graves discussing changes to how fathers and paternal families are treated, engaged, and involved within Los Angeles County's child welfare system. And it's right here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

[00:03:38]: Dr. Alan-Michael Graves and Angela Parks-Pyles, welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast and let me get right to it. When we've been talking with other jurisdictions about their involvement in the BSC, a lot of them point to an impetus or a desire within their agency to improve

their relationship or their engagement with paternal families or fathers. But tell me, Angela, how it was actually the community that played an initial role in LA County's involvement in this particular BSC?

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:04:15]: Absolutely. And so, I can't start at this particular BSC, I have to start a long time before that. So happy to have Alan-Michael partnering with me because that's how the work started. It started with Alan-Michael, you know, coming to the county of Los Angeles. At that time, he was working with Project bother to tell that story. But, more importantly for me with that of being a regional administrator, being an office head of an entire operation where we have social worker then, you know, boots on the ground staff. And so, already knowing that in child welfare, just by the fact that the child's case is in the mother's name, you know, that's been the discipline. You know, not only for me working at DCFS, but even when I started my educational journey, you know, it's always been a slant towards the mothers. And if I'm being really honest with myself, even in my indoctrination as far as, you know, family and culture and things of that nature, you know, it's mama's baby, daddy's maybe. Okay. That has always rang in my head, and you know, culturally, you know, didn't see anything negative with that. And even the, you know, the adage of the father helping the mother or the father babysitting their child. And so, I say all that to say that you already come to this work with a bias.

[00:05:46]: And so, not even realizing that you come with that bias. And so, with that, you know, Alan-Michael stepped up as a community member, you know, just to say not only to myself, but many of us in leadership, you know, you really see, you know, exactly how biased you are towards the paternal family. And I knew that we were, you know, somewhat biased, but you know, I'll be candid - I had no idea how biased and more importantly, how it really effected, you know, the actual family, the child and even the paternal relative. I don't know that I had gone deep enough to realize it's not just the father. You're talking about a grandmother or grandfather, cousins and aunties and relatives and then child welfare. You know, the richness of a child's life, as anywhere else is that of the village, the family, the tribe. And not realizing that, that really wasn't not only about a case being in a mother's name, it was about denying, you know, this child and his family of just an entire lineage, you know. And so yeah, as I shared with you before, you know, it is absolutely the community, and in particular Alan-Michael, that came to me personally and said let's partner. You know, and oftentimes when community comes to a government agency, you know, seemingly it is, you know, what do they need? And I have to say, you know, this particular community partner came offering bearing gifts, you know. And with that, you know, it sounded different, it felt different, it moved different, you know, and so I was like, yeah, let's do it. So, I'll stop there. And I'll let Alan-Michael, maybe even add on.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:07:37]: Yeah. Thank you, Angela. So, I came to the department - I'll say ignorant. Right. I was working with families for ten years maybe prior to that, and teaching fathers parenting tools. And along the way, I realized that we were teaching these tools and giving these fathers education and information around parenting. But we were releasing them back out into society and systems who weren't very father friendly. And in particular in Los Angeles, it was the child welfare system. So, I'd be working with a guy for six months and he would be like Alan-Michael, you know, I got all that you were saying, but I'm having trouble here, there. And initially I didn't believe them. And until I started partnering - actually before I partnered we were just looking at how the community was treated by the department and it wasn't treated in a bad way, it was treated in an unknowing way. And so, as the representative of the community, as Angela said, I just came to the table and said, listen, my experience has been these fathers are not treated fairly. There's no equity. And we're actually preventing the reunification of these families in the way that we all say we want. And so, we began this partnership to look at how we might utilize community and government systems - and department being, DCFS being the biggest - to help these families reunify in a different way than we had had before.

[00:09:12]: As it pertains to the BSC, I, as a willing partner at that point with DCFS, joined the team in the BSC thinking, to be honest with you, this is another one of those check the box type things. And so, yes, I agree to be part of the team, yes, I'll go to DCFS, I'll participate. Not thinking that the outcome would be the outcome that it was. So, it was, it was huge that we were, the community was invited to that space because they could have participated in and done, like systems have done for a long time and said yes we do, yes we do. But me being an, and I'll just say an outspoken person of the community, it was brave of them to invite me to be in the team, to highlight nationally.

TOM OATES [00:10:07]: Well, I'm curious to actually dive into the strategies that, actually, Alan-Michael, the way you describe it kind of like maybe turn your, your perspective around to saying, all right, this is beyond a check the box kind of exercise. But Angela, walk back with me when you talked about, you talked culturally of how kind of fathers were kind of put in a, in a different, maybe, mindset. But how had the county itself been addressing father and paternal family engagement, the way Alan-Michael described it as, you know, they weren't treated fairly. Can you give me some examples of what the agency was or wasn't doing?

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:10:49]: We were listening to the mother. So, I'll give you a for instance, if we go to a mother and we ask her, you know, who's the father, which is a standard question, you know, you want to know the parentage and she says I don't know, I haven't spoken to him, I didn't know who he was - well, typically, you know, years ago, we didn't go any further. We just wrote it down, unknown. And as such, the court followed suit, as well. You know, we'd take a court report, we'd go to court. We were never pushed on who's the father? No one ever asked well are there grandparents, are there aunts, are there cousins? And again, this is not only LA County, this is child welfare. And so in many ways, you know, and, you know, oftentimes you would have a father, you know, that would, you know, find out some sort of way and call the department and father always has to prove he's the father. Mother never has to prove she's the mother, you know, and that's whether or not we were there when she gave birth at the hospital or not. She can walk in off the street and say I'm mother and we just take it at face value, you know, but a father - never. A father could never walk into a DCFS office and say that I am father X and that we say, okay, let's discuss your case.

[00:12:11]: So, you know, that's just a couple of the ways, you know that I can point it out. And there are many others. But those two, you know, quite descriptive and those, those have been most often, hopefully not so much now, but probably still in some spaces. Also, I did want to wrap back around about the BSC. And so, when we were, the federal government reached out to us to be involved, it was through what they'd heard in other arenas and forms from Alan-Michael. Not that Alan-Michael was saying, you know, you need to choose LA County. They had been on forums and in spaces whereby he was, you know, he discussed what was going on authentically in LA County with this partnership. And, you know, that precipitated us having an invitation to the table. You know, everybody wanted to hear, you know, really, they want to know, is it true I was going to be really honest with you. I know when they reached out to me, you know, because the executive sponsor and, you know, a huge catalyst for this work in the department. You know, myself and some others, you know, they say, you know, is this really true what we're hearing? We've heard this said and so on and so forth, you know, and we were able to tell them, oh, no, not only is it true that and more. Especially when it comes to Alan-Michael, you know, because he's right about being the loudest voice and what I can say to that is thank god.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:13:40]: Well, I would add to that, you know, and what Angela's talking about, I do this work across the country and I work in a lot of spaces with a lot of shy welfare systems and a lot of communities that are working with or against those systems. And I had been saying in other

spaces, you guys need to do what we're doing in Los Angeles, right? Because - and this will go in a little bit about one of your future questions - but when we first came to the table, it wasn't pretty, right. It was, it was, we were both defensive. And even Angela and I, you know, Angela was like, this is what the department does and I'm like, well, this is what the fathers are saying and we were butting heads. And it wasn't until really hunkering down and saying, okay, wait a minute, we're losing the focus. And the focus is the families. Let's put our guards down, our dukes down, and really strategically think about how we're going to do this. And Angela said, Okay, well then let me send some of my staff to be trained by you. That was the catalyst to all of this work being done.

[00:14:41]: So, going back to talking about this nationally, I was like being a director of a fatherhood program, I understood how fatherhood programs and child welfare systems and child support systems, they were like fire and water, right? They just didn't mix. And I was telling them about a partnership that I was in where it was mixing and it was mixing well, and the outcomes were fathers were starting to reunify. Father were starting to be part of the case plan. Fathers were happy because they had their children in their lives. And so, when Angela talks about Mathematica reaching out, that's what they were asking. We've been hearing in different spaces that this partnership is producing these things, we want to find out if it's real. And so, you know the rest of the story.

TOM OATES [00:15:32]: Well, I think there's a unique story here in, in LA. One, because I don't think anybody can just walk around and go "LA" because LA means a lot of things to a lot of people. And you've got multiple communities in multiple divisions within the county itself. So, two things here about, as we start to talk about, like the teaming in getting the agency itself involved. First, Angela - and I want to kind of remind myself to kind of talk about your unique role and ability to kind of gain momentum coming from the position that you're in within the organization - but first, so you were able to, and just for folks who are listening to understand that the BSC was not just implemented in one part of LA, but you had two communities involved. So, you kind of had this - and we talked earlier - you had the one team, two communities approach. Can you explain that to me?

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:16:24]: Yeah. So, when DFC did come and meet with us in LA County, so, first of all, LA County child welfare is larger than most states. Just LA County. We have 20 regional sites, offices. 19 regional administrators. And again, one office in and of itself can have 3,000 children. And again, that's more than most whole entire child welfare systems. So, with that, when you come to LA County and you really want a true picture, and more so than just a true picture. You know, as Alan-Michael, stated, for us, we've made a decision a long time ago and we've been at this for a very long time. You know, people probably think we just descended into father engagement - what Alan-Michael speaks of and our meeting of the minds, I mean, that came over a period of time and working together and toiling together - and I do mean toiling together and largely around our equity work for African American children and families. So, we already had a relationship, we had a forum. We had all of those things long before the BSC. And so, I say that to say that when you really want to effect change in LA County and we don't do anything - and when I say we, I mean, myself, as well as the community - we put our stake in the ground. We don't do anything - to Alan-Michael's point that he made earlier - that's not really going to effectuate change. And so, in LA County for you to center in on just one community, one office, by the time that it leads, let's say in particular Vermont Corridor, which is South LA and it gets to Palmdale, we've gone through three directors and we've gone through three practice changes and so, you know, it was not going to be effective. Not to the point that we knew that it needed to be.

[00:18:18]: And so, what I proposed for the BSC - and they did have to go back, you know, and say we can't make that decision - I proposed for them for us to get involved. That we would need to do, there's

only one team, okay. That's number one. We're not coming with two different perspectives or any of those things. But it is two communities. Two very diverse and different communities. And yes, they have large African American populations, but within that is diversity. And so for us, you know, what we had to offer was being involved, lot of work. However, one team, two communities. And thankfully they agreed to it, they understood it. And so, that's how we emerged as two communities - one being that Vermont Corridor and the other being the Palmdale office, which is in the Antelope Valley area.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:19:12]: Yeah. If I could just add, Tom, really quick. Because for me it's exactly what Angela said but, but the term or the approach one team, two communities. Also, in addition to the geographic location in Los Angeles, it was also the department and the community were two separate communities that had to team together as one to get the work done. Right. So, it was, for me it was twofold. Four teams down to one, right? Yeah. I just want, I'll add that.

TOM OATES [00:19:45]: Angela, you are in a unique position. Having been like you had mentioned, a regional director and then moving into your current role. So, when you talk about trying to get the teams to become one team, you had to identify the, the right folks and also make sure that there was going to be momentum from all of these teams to join as one. How important, maybe even just the value of the uniqueness, but how important was that to kind of just stir that momentum and move that forward and, and get this implemented, implementation team kind of on the same page to start?

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:20:24]: And so, it was paramount. Again, we weren't going to be able to join the BSC with that being the case because again, just to start in one area for LA County, the movement would just, it's just too slow. But more importantly, organically, we already knew the hoop. We already know the champions in this work and we're not talking about those that rally and rah, rah, we're talking about those that get in. Volunteer, you know, roll up their sleeves, you know, change agents. And so, it was very easy for Alan-Michael and I to, you know, agree on who that should be. I mean, these are already champions, they're warriors and they're not the only ones. But they were the two at the time that we knew would bring the diversity that was needed, they are on opposite ends geographically. And both of them are leaders within their own right. You know, you have a black male leader, you have a black female leader. And it's very important with the way that we are, I would say our landscape, in that there are those that lead silently and there are those that lead boldly. And these are two leaders that the rest would come on board. And that's very important, you have to know. So, you're looking at these two leaders and you're saying, okay, if VC is doing it and Palmdale is doing it, we want in, you know, and that's exactly what has happened. I'll let Alan-Michael.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:21:51]: No, I agree with you and I would also add - and Angela, she didn't coin the phrase, but she was the one who brought it to our group and we did it intentionally and unapologetically, right? So, intentionally we wanted to pick the right people. And there was a diversity in that we had Caucasian fathers that had been through, Latino men and women at the table. And the team. So, it was intentional with the team was, and it was very important that it was those people if we wanted to, to create and further the momentum that we had already done through this BSC. And Angela and her position in the department and just her personality itself, to be perfectly honest with you, was instrumental in bringing those people to the table. Because it meant you had to have some courage. It meant that you had to be able to say, this ain't right and we're willing to fix it, right? And we're willing to partner with the community to do it. Not everybody's in that position or willing to do that because you've got to stick your head out a little bit, right? As a community member, I had to, too I knew in the work that I was doing, some people were just not going to like what I was being said. Right? And some of the community members would feel like, oh my God, he done sold out to the department, is working

with the department. But I learned early on you gotta be at the table. Right. And so, Angela bringing everybody to the table, I think was again instrumental in making sure that that momentum was able to move the work forward.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:23:21]: And, Tom, it's important to know when Alan-Michael was talking, I thought of something, because he's so right. So, for the two of us, we really put our backs up against each other. We have both stepped out there when it could've landed us differently, but we were willing to do it. He was willing to do it with his employer where he was, yes he was a community partner, but he let his heart lead. Oftentimes to a fault. Not a fault in the work, but a fault to his position. And I have done the same thing. And so, it's just perfect synergy around - as John Lewis would say, good trouble - when you get Alan-Michael and Angela together, it's good trouble.

TOM OATES [00:24:06]: Well, there's something to be said about when a leader takes the risk and is going to show that be it courage, be it strength or be it the first one to stand up, because then you'll get folks to follow. But if a leader shows to be cautious, everybody else takes a step back. So, this is a testament to the leadership. And if you've got multiple teams, when those leaders are both aligned. And everybody's just everybody's in agreement. There's a lot of times where you get agreement in conversation, but never agreement in action. But if your leaders take that first step and it's a bold step, people then see the path get, get, get forged. Let me move a little bit into the actual implementation here. And if you, if you are able to, to kind of go through some of those strategies or within the BSC was called the plan, do study, act. Those strategies that you guys implemented and implemented with the community and how they kind of aligned to your overarching goals of really turning the tables on father engagement.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:25:16]: Alan-Michael, I'll let you kick it off.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:25:27]: Sure. So, in our PDSAs, we didn't want them to be talk, right? And so, we wanted them to be measurable and realistic. And so, but again, going back to being intentional and unapologetic, and I'll give you an example of one of the first ones we did. And it goes back to what Angela said about, you know, in the culture of just going with the flow of father not being not being involved or father known. In one of those two regions, in the Vermont Corridor, one of our plan do study acts was to create a instrument that would counter that. Right. And so, we called it a father inclusion form that we created. And it just meant that you were going to take the extra step to not go along with father just unknown. And I'll give you an example of that form. We had heard before that the mother of a child would say, oh, he's deceased. Well, in this form it made you ask a couple more questions and it made you do a little more. So, if she says, Oh, the father's not around, he's dead. Well, oh, this form said well, then ask for a copy of the death certificate. So, now we know for sure he's dead. Right. But prior to that, we would have written in the report father deceased, right. And so, in the test, the pilot was in this one, office, workers and staff started to utilize this, this form that was a strategy implemented through the BSC that then spread and people across the county started to hear about, oh my God, they have this one, it's a one-page form with just maybe 10 questions, but it made all the difference in intentionally including the father and/or paternal relatives. Because to Angela's point, if they said he was dead, they wouldn't even, you know, move any further. It was like, Okay, that's it. But now, because this form guided you to say, okay, well, where's his mom and does he have any siblings that might be able to take this child prior to them going into care, right? That's a different mentality and very strategic and those type, that's how, that's how we guided the PDSAs.

[00:27:30]: We did it around our race and equity work at the same time. What PDSA could we create that would be intentional, unapologetic, and show momentum at addressing racial inequity that we see not just in the department, but in our society and systems in general, right? So, we were strategic at creating those and aligning it with the community so that it was both, we're not putting the onus on the department to do it, but the community had a role, too, going back to that partnership, I'll stop. You gotta stop me because I could talk all day.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:28:09]: And Alan-Michael is right. And about the intentionality, again, see, when you're already doing the work, the BSC actually came along at a very good time for where we're positioning, we were positioning to be. So for us, we already had ideas around, you know, what needs to change, what needs to look different. And this was, if I could say, this was just the infusion that I feel that we needed, you know, and not only for our jurisdiction, but even to get from other jurisdictions, you know, you always are in a posture of learning. And so, this was a perfect time for us to, even to me, test out some of our theories and what we were thinking and so on and so forth. And so, to Alan-Michael's point, I call that form that he mentioned a game changer, you know. To ask the question - it goes back to what I said in the beginning, you know - we would just take it at its word, you know, now you can't, you shouldn't, you won't, you know, all of those things. And so, with that, you know, it's for the BSC at this time, at this place for LA County, it was like our next step. It was the push. Because sometimes we get mired down by what we call the whirlwind of priority, and I can go on and on about our crisis, and things of that nature. But this centered us. I know that's what it did for LA County. It centered us. You know, we had deliverables, we had timetables, we had technical support. You know, all of the things that you really need when you're talking about implementing. And so, for us it was just a perfect time and place for LA County.

TOM OATES [00:29:47]: What it also sounds like, is that structure allowed the real change to happen, which wasn't a structural change per se, but as Alan-Michael mentioned, a mental shift to how is everybody approaching? What are you walking into the conversations with? You know, how is your, how is your view, how are you viewing the world, right? And so, not only is that something as simple as a one-page form, but in making that mental shift, you guys also instituted a little bit of a marketing or a communication campaign to get that conversation going. So, you're planting more seeds in people's heads to approach things a little differently. Father Strong, right? That was the term. What was that campaign across the county, what did that mean to the counties, systems and agencies when that was implemented and rolled out?

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:30:41]: I'll let you start, Angela, and then I'll give what I think.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:30:42]: Absolutely. And so what we know about LA County and child welfare in general is again, as I mentioned, the whirlwind. So many priorities, so many policies, so many everything. Really - and you think you have to say something seven times for an adult, we had said 107 times, okay. In child welfare, it has to be something that just is, it's gotta be what you do - Alan-Michael talks about this all the time - it can't be mandated. You know, we don't do well with mandates in LA County, I can tell you that, you know, we'll do it for this week, but the minute you take your eye off of it, that mandate is out the window. As Alan called our check boxes, we always checking boxes around here. And so, for this not to be a check box, I mean, it took, it took us a while to land on Father Strong. We went through several, you know, different monikers and things of that nature, we were like uh uh, no, no, no, no, no. That's not it. But it not only needed to be something that we could grasp it had to be something that somebody, a father from the community could walk into a lobby, see it, and think, wow, I mean, it was more than just about us. And I just remember being in Pasadena where we landed on

Fathers Strong and it did something. It was one of those, another one of those heart string type things. You felt it. It was like that's it. Okay. All the other little catchy things and all of that. Because not only again from the department, it just clicked into Fathers Strong, fathers are strong, of course they're strong - and we're not talking about physically, you know, we're talking about emotionally, mentally. You know, they are, they're really the strong part of a family, you know, all of that.

[00:32:36]: And so for the department, you know, it became, you know, Father Strong, what's Father Strong? And then we started talking about that everywhere we went, we'll say father engagement and we'll say Father Strong. If I hear someone say fatherhood, I'll put in the chat, Father Strong, you know, we all, we all do it, especially the whole champion crew. And so again, you know, for me, more importantly was not only what the department could get out of it - and Alan-Michael can speak to this better than I ever could - but for a father to hear that this department, child welfare, you know, is coining Father Strong, you know, that did it for me.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:33:15]: Yeah, that's exactly where I was going to go. In working with fathers and engaging systems far too often we, everything's the deficit, right? It's what they're not doing, it's how, what they're not, who they not are, how much money they don't have, how long their criminal record is, how they're abusive, right? And we wanted to change the narrative. The subtitle to Father Strong is stronger families, stronger communities, right? So, Father Strong, stronger families, stronger communities. And what we knew at the very beginning, not that we wanted to highlight fathers, we wanted to use fathers and paternal relative as another medium to improving the outcomes of kids - hence stronger families, stronger communities. And so, just changing the narrative about the deadbeat dad. We thought we wanted something that just with the words - and again, Angela said, you know, it's not physical. I'm a, I'm a strong daddy, right? I tell people all the time I'm the best damn daddy I know, right. And for me to hear that an entity - with all my shortcomings, right, I'm still the best dad I know. So, for, as to Angela's point, when a father hears Father Strong as the tagline of the Department of Children and Family Services, they're like, Wait a minute, this is a different shift then what we've heard before where they're always talking about we ain't no good, right?

[00:34:35]: And so it, not, it was not only popular amongst those of us who were creating this partnership. And it was strategic again because it wasn't a department initiative and we were just going along with it, it was a complete partnership between the community and the department, so nobody had more power than the other. Decisions were made together. And this was to hopefully further the work of the father engagement and paternal relative work that we had already been doing. So, this was supposed to catapult it to the next level and it's exactly what it did.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:35:10]: And it's subliminal, Tom. I mean, for me, for the boots on the ground staff - to Alan-Michael's point - and we thought about all of that. We talked about all of that. It's subliminal. Father Strong. I mean, you know, you get that in your head. You know, it starts to change the way you move. When you're thinking about paternal relatives and just paternalistic thoughts and things of that nature. We're going to change that narrative not only, you know, for the fathers, you know, within ourselves, you know, and so it had everything to do about all of that.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:35:43]: No, I was just going say, I would add and we also talked about and thought about and anticipated the backlash like, right. So, are you saying fathers are more, more important than mothers? Absolutely not. We utilize Father Strong as saying that's a strong component to the family to assist mother, to assist the children. So, this is about when you say family, you mean the whole family, not just mothers and children, which is what systems typically do when they say families,

it really means mama and kids. We're saying we're going to be intentional and unapologetic about when we say family, we mean the whole family and this Father Strong initiative will be intentional in including that in the Department of Children and Family Services, which it hadn't been in the past.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:36:26]: Which takes me back - I gotta throw this in right here because I don't want to forget it. And this was another Alan-Michaelism. So, it is intentional that black women, women in general, are carrying the message. It sounds different when you have a black woman that's saying oh absolutely, the father is strong. Hence the other leader, which was a female. We wanted to make sure we had a male and a female because it is important and yes, they are strong and they are pivotal. And it is important to everyone to know that it is not a competition. Okay? But you need both parts and Alan-Michael, it's very interesting when he landed on it. And he started at one point, it was just fathers and men that were in the community and doing this work. And I happened to be partnered with him when he landed on it. It was genius. When he landed - we had some women champions. We need women walking through these offices and in the community, you know, and for me that resonated and I think that's another place where Alan-Michael and I had synergy. I think when we had our moment - you'll remember that - was one of my blind spots was the fact that I had very strong, strong paternal, familial relatives. My grandfather, my great-grandfather, my father. But that's not the reality for most, especially for African Americans. And so, it was - and I can say that now - it was a blind spot for me because it was like, Well, how dare you, I love men, you know. And Alan-Michael was going yeah, you do. Okay. Alan-Michael said yeah, you do but look around, look around see others, you know, their story is different, you know, and so, even just that and those kind of moments, you know, for me, you know, I became honored to be like one of the voices in this work.

[00:38:27]: Because remembering - and I have to say, I know Alan-Michael knows this because I've been on stage as a result of him and things of that nature. You know, I always knew how important that was to who I am. But really in this work, I was able to truly just go all the way back. Alan-Michael heard me do it on a stage I think Tiffany was there, too, at one of his fatherhood meetings that he does and used to do in June. And, even when I was getting my, my speech together and all of that, it was so easy to write and so easy to deliver because it's so true. And I started to then pick out aspects of myself and my personality and my boldness and all of that leads back to who my paternal parent was, you know. And so, just in this work, you really even find yourself. And then you're able to like, as we say, unapologetically, intentionally, like I have to do this, this is not something that I'm mandated to do. We have to do this. So, I had to throw that in.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:39:36]: Well, and to the last part of your question, Tom, about how does it, how does it, what does it mean to other systems, right? So, now across LA County in most systems, they are aware of Father Strong. I do the same work in child support and with LA USD and probation. And they are aware that we are changing the narrative around specifically these men of color who are deficient and dead beats to strong people in the community that can help us make a change, whether it be in incarceration or healthcare. Strong men are part of the solution to addressing some of our social inequities.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:40:18]: And, Tom, it's so interesting, child support reached out to DCFS. Never in my career would I think I would see this. To ask us why we thought that fathers, in particular fathers of color, black and brown, would not come forth. They, you know, we know they love their children. So, you know, we're all changing the narrative. And I never thought I would see the day that they would come to DCFS and ask and we would tell them the truth and tell them that the only way we would partner with them - which is a system that we have now - I'll partner with you, but not as a

gotcha. I refuse. I will never give you a father's name for you to get financial support. I have my whole thoughts around that. And yes, fathers, mothers, everyone should financially support to the best of their ability, their children, but more importantly, I need them in their lives. I need them to give them what money could never give them. And so, even to have that kind of a conversation with child support and them to be willing to listen to everyone's point, yours and Alan-Michael's about position and, you know, and me being in a position where I am able to be an executive that would say, you know, because what you do is detrimental to a child or to a family. You think you're helping, but you're not. There's other ways of coming at where you're trying to go. But the way you really want to do it is through the heart of the child. So, I had to throw that in, as well.

TOM OATES [00:41:50]: Well you're giving this sense of, I wanted to go and ask about outcomes because you can change minds, but what does the data tell you? Well, you just, you've just given me all the outcomes and what a culture shift can do. Because you've gone beyond checking the box and really now to talking about, Well, let's be honest. A system may have structure to it and process and protocols, but it's still run by people. And when decisions have to be made within that structure, it's still people who are making those decisions with their hearts and minds. And if you're changing those, you can change the system. But I'd be curious to think about what are the biggest lessons, or maybe even this - if you were to do this all over again, because if somebody is listening right now and they've gone through 40 minutes of this and it sounds great. It sounds like everything just, you know, somebody took a step up and everything happened and poof magic. Not so. Give me a sense of what you found the most challenging through this.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:42:54]: I'll, I'll start right. If I could, though, Tom, just add some outcomes and then I'll get to your question, right? Because for me, the data and outcomes is in the people that I serve. I still facilitate fatherhood groups. And when I hear a father say because of the partnership and Father Strong, I have reunified with my son or reunified with my daughter - that's all the outcome that I need. And I hear frequently now, it used to be there making me jump through another hoop, they've done all this to me, they shut me out, they're cancelling my visitation, and now we're starting to hear differently. And in our support groups every week when we get, hit a milestone, somebody will walk in, hey, I increased my visits, I went to unmonitored - we all clapped, right, that used to be once in a while. Now with every week. That's the outcome that I hope, hoped that would happen.

[00:43:43]: I also hear - because I spent a significant amount of my time working with the department - I hear an attitude and a cultural change amongst the staff. I hear them checking each other. Girl, did you ask about the father? Did you ask about the daddy? Right. So, they're, they don't need Alan-Michael anymore because the champions in the office are challenging each other about their practice change. Those are big outcomes for me because that means we're not just changing policy, we're changing how we actually implement policy into practice with families that we serve. So, the, the biggest lessons learned, there's two. And it goes back to your first question. The community cannot do it by itself, neither can the department, right? That was the biggest challenge because I went in - and you'll probably edit this - but I went in to kick <beep> with the department. Right. I'm gonna go in and kick <beep> and take names. Didn't work, right? It, I don't care if I would have rallied all of the community together. The department is a system that's guided by policies and laws that the community needs to understand. So, the biggest lesson learned for me is that there needed to be a partnership, right?

[00:44:40]: The other lessons learned, lesson learned is that we all have some, some, some family drama trauma. All of us, I don't care who you are. And one of the, I think the biggest instruments we took away from the BSC was to really hone in on the training that we were doing. And this wasn't the very didactic,

stand in front of the room and do quotes and statistics. This was let's get in there and, Angela, let's talk about your father. Let's talk about your husband, right? Because that's going to make you reflect on their roles and hence the people that are standing in front of you as clients, right? It was a different approach because prior to that, we had done just those regular father engagement training. The traditional check the box implicit bias, sexual harassment training. And we changed it through the BSC and it was very intentional, we're going to have some straight talk. We're going to talk about how Andy, Tom, Tiffany, Alan-Michael, Angela, we all have bias. All of us, and all of us guess what have a bias against men of color? We can't help it, right? Our society paints a picture when we see those mugshots, when we hear and CNN and Fox and all the, it gives us a bias that we sometimes we're not aware of. And it means we have to talk about it before we start working with families who mirror what we're hearing. When people start to address, you know, it's okay to have biases. I just can't let it affect my work. That's a different mindset the that ignorance like, oh, I don't see color, I don't hear color. I don't see color. That's different. Right. And so we started to see people saying, Well, you know what, I can't just call this guy aggressive anymore because aggressive means a lot when you when you put it on a man of color.

[00:46:35]: Because when I see aggressive on a black man's case plan, it means that in my mind, if I was a judge, oh, maybe he hit somebody or he did something. And in all actuality, it was he hung up the phone on me, right. That's not aggressive. And so, we start having real conversations around what that looks like and we were intentional. So, the lessons learned was to take it to the next level of being a little more realistic than the policy and the systems that were created long ago that haven't worked for decades. We were intentional at changing it and doing something different and being bold about it was my lesson, right? Yeah.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:47:14]: And so, for me on the department side, we stayed siloed too long. And so, if I had to go back, you know, all over again, we would be doing things simultaneously. You know, we're just now getting into policy and training as Alan-Michael mentioned. And as he said, you know, like hands-on training, real talk. And that's I think the name of the training, and I love it. Real talk. Okay. We're just getting there, you know, so I imagine had we done that, you know, some of that even from the beginning, how much further along we would be. And so, we kept it to ourselves, you know, and I kept it to myself and my crew. My little group, you know, we should have pushed the envelope a little more. We pushed it, but not like we're pushing it now. And so, if I had to go back - and that was your question - and do it all over again, you know, it would have been structured in a way that we were doing both ends and I mean, you know, it takes for a policy in this department it takes a year, you know, Alan-Michael was actively sitting on the father engagement policy group, you know, and it's good work. But it takes time to move the ship, you know? So, imagine that we start moving that ship, at the same time we start having these revelations, you know, we would be further along And again, I understand we are where we are. And to Alan-Michael's point, the other thing I hear people are doing and I love that we've made, if you will, a safe space. I have leaders that come to myself and Alan-Michael and say, I don't do well with fathers. I don't do well. I would rather you do that any day of the week, then take your biased self and ruin that case, you know, and then come for the help.

[00:49:06]: And so we have people that are stepping up and realizing it, and you know, we've done the, undoing the bias - what is it, the implicit bias is what I'm thinking about. We've done implicit bias training where you can say I'm biased. We're all biased to Alan-Michael's point. And so, now we have those that will say, you know - and they know why they don't do well with family, to Alan-Michael's point because little Angela didn't do well, you know, her father left her and he abandoned her. And so, they abandon. Fathers abandon. So, I'm not wasting my time on person that's gonna abandon - anyway,

you're bringing your own stuff, if you will, into the room. So, we now have those that are saying, I see it. It's probably not a good case for me, you know, to serve. And that's movement. So, again, you know, it would be the silo, the silos and certainly the training. And not, as Alan-Michael will say, the didactic training, the training that he is spearheading where people are in rooms and they're crying, they need to cry. Okay, we need to cry, you know, we need to get to the root of all for us to be able to service anyone. And so now we're doing that. And so with those things together, you know, if we could have just done sooner, but the good news is we're doing them now.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:50:28]: I have one other takeaway that I would do differently. I would request that we had brought other partners - and I learned this in the BSC from other places - that we would've brought our judicial and our legal systems in, in our partnership early on because we're doing all that we're doing and if the judges and attorneys are not on board, we're still stuck. So, I would have brought and made an equal partner, our judicial system, part of this work. So, they got it early on because now we're going back and trying to pull them in and say listen and what we've learned and jump on board. I wish we would have started with them and said - and to our defense, we did have some legal partners on, but not the judicial system. We didn't have the judges at the table in the way that we needed them to make the changes that we want and that we're seeing now in hindsight.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:51:19]: Totally agree, totally agree.

TOM OATES [00:51:22]: In going on this, now, not every jurisdiction out there has the luxury of calling Alan-Michael. And, and they don't have somebody like Angela who has a position within the hierarchy to be able to kind of make that bold step and be courageous with it. But Angela and Alan-Michael, I'd, finally, I'd like to get your take - you've given us a lot of thought on what you may have done differently and how other jurisdictions who are thinking about making these kind of steps. What would the advice you would give to a cohort somewhere else across the country who is at that decision point about making a cultural change like this. What would your advice be to them?

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:52:07]: So, I would back up and say that I disagree with you a little bit, right? I'll push back on it, because I think everybody does and can have an Alan-Michael and Angela. And what the BSC taught me is that - because I thought I was going again, going to come in and I was going to be the errand boy for the department and praise them - but from the beginning the BSC said no, your voice is just as strong as Angela's, right? So in the, my words of advice would be in communities that are trying to have, in those jurisdictions where they're trying to have community and the department work together, that they go in as equal partners and not - because I've been one of those partners when you go on with the system that you're the Amen, you're in the amen corner, right? And if you buck, they're out because they're in charge - create partnerships where it's equal and not one sided, right? Because as a community member, I am representing the people of Los Angeles, right? And so, I have an obligation to not just let Angela say, well, this is the way the department runs like it or not, no. Then I need to go to other methods and bring other people. Obviously, that's not what she said, but if it was respectfully I'd be like, Oh, no, that don't work for me because I'm representing. So, my advice would be don't stand for on both sides, that it has to be this way or that way, that really both come to the table with an equal partnership to do what you need to do, because I don't think we could have done it if even in the BSC, if at the beginning they didn't say, we want the community, we want fathers, we want the department, we want everybody. And, we were invited to all of those meetings. Right? Because they could've easily just - even with this, Tom, you could have easily just interviewed Angela. But to have community at the table that's intentional. That will give somebody else hearing that saying, Oh, it wasn't just the departments that there was a community member at the table at the same time. That was huge.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:54:09]: So this is my favorite question, for several reasons. I love that Alan-Michael said that - and Tom won't mind me sharing this with you. So, they did come to me. And I said - as I always say - okay, yeah I can't do this without Alan-Michael.

TOM OATES [00:54:28]: True, true.

ANGELA PARKS-PYLES [00:54:29]: So, I mean, that's just real, you know, and so and that's what, that's one thing everybody can do. Refuse to go into space without your partner. Me going into this space without Alan-Michael is like me walking in without my legs. I'm just going to keep it real. And so, you know, as you know, like, I was like we gotta get Alan-Michael's schedule. And if Alan-Michael can't make it, then I can't. And that's what happened, Tom knows, that's exactly what happened. What I would say to you, Tom, is it's an excuse. And I can say that I've been in child welfare for 30 years for that person. And I've said this in spaces when I've been asked, you know. But what about when you're in a jurisdiction where you can't do what you're doing. What I would say to you is I was doing this before I was in this position. I would also say to you, it is, I can do less in this position than I could do in lower positions. And why is that? Because I'm amongst the people. I'm amongst the practitioners. I am boots on the ground. This work did not start when I became an executive. All that I get to do now that I'm an executive is to be at the table where I'm able to say, did you guys know this was happening? Which they did not. Okay. So, I get to bring it to that space and in that room, but what I can tell you, my greatest work was done when I was in the field. And Alan-Michael can attest to it, as can Tiffany. I can, I can't even go to the same meetings that I could go to when I was boots on the ground, you know. And so, it's an excuse because, to Alan-Michael's point, we all come with free will. You have to decide how you're going to exercise yours.

[00:56:04]: And Alan-Michael's, right. For me, I've always been unapologetic. I'm always, I've always said, What do you mean you don't see me. I'm an African American woman, proud of it and wouldn't want to be anything any differently. But that's as a CSW and SCSW, which is a supervisor, social worker, a regional administrator all well before I became an executive. I've been an executive only four years out of the 34. So for 30 years, I've been the same person. But you have to be bold. You have to, you have to, your truth, you have to, you have to buy in. And again, you know, it can't just be for show, it can't be something you do. For those of us that work in this, we can't be climbing, if you will. You know, for me, this executive position, I, this is the first time I ever agreed to come to the executive level because it was around the community. Everything that I do, everything in my bureau is around the community. You know, our young people, faith, equity, those kind of thing. That is my life. So, stepping into this was what I was already doing anyway, but you have to be willing to be true to yourself. That's what Alan-Michael's talking about. You have to be willing to really be in this work because it's who you are, not what you do. And so, I would say to them it doesn't matter your jurisdiction, and did you say that - I just met with Minnesota, they had me come in with everything going on there around George Floyd and these kinds of things. And I told them the same thing. I told them I did not work because I'm the Deputy Director in the largest child welfare agency. I was already in this space, regardless of my moniker. So, that would be what I would share with them.

TOM OATES [00:57:51]: One of the more enjoyable conversations I've had in more than 70 episodes hosting the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. And that's because you guys, as you've mentioned a few times, intentional and unapologetic. And I thank you so much because I can just hear from, from the passion that not only do you care about what you're doing, that you're incredibly busy doing it. And for you both to carve out some time and share with us what you're doing, what you've done, what you continue to do. And then hopefully folks can, can have some takeaways to implement

what you've done in LA and part of the BSC and everything that you guys are making change. Angela Park-Pyles, Dr. Alan-Michael Graves. Thank you guys so much for joining and for sharing and being a part of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

ALAN-MICHAEL GRAVES [00:58:51]: Thank you for inviting us, thanks for having us.

TOM OATES [00:58:54]: Now, if you haven't heard the other parts of this series, I encourage you to listen to the other episodes featuring what occurred in Hartford, Connecticut and Prowers County, Colorado. Now, there are different approaches, teams and strategies applied that worked for their communities. So, it gives you a different perspective from not only what we heard from such a large organization like LA County, but a mid-size region like Hartford and a more rural, smaller agency, in Southeastern Colorado. And you can find all the episodes of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast on Apple podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher and SoundCloud, and also on childwelfare.gov. This episode's web page - just go to childwelfare.gov and search podcasts - e will have links to the fathers and continuous learning and child welfare projects BSC pilot study report. And that's titled A Seat at the Table: Piloting Continuous Learning to Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare. And you can read the insights into the implementation of a BSC and potential strategies for increasing father and paternal relative engagement in child welfare. We'll also have links to information gateway resources on engaging fathers and paternal family members, a list of fatherhood organizations, along with links to the National Fatherhood Initiative and the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

[01:00:20]: Alright. I really want to thank Angela Parks-Pyles from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services and Dr. Alan-Michael Graves from the good plus foundation for their time and willingness to be, as they said, intentionally unapologetic in chatting with us today. And of course, my thanks to you for listening and joining us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates. Have a great day.

FEMALE NARRATOR [01:00:53]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.