

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – Finding the Heart of Title IV-E with Dean Miller Part 1
TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Gabriel Foley, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Dean Justin 'Jay' Miller', University of Kentucky College of Social Work

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

Gabriel [00:00:04]: Hello, and welcome to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, your space to learn more about the burgeoning topics across child welfare from the nationwide information service of the Children's Bureau. My name's Gabriel Foley, and I've taken the mantle as the host of the Information Gateway podcast. I have both personal and professional experience in child welfare, having grown up in care and pursued my own journey of permanency. And now part of the wonderful team at the Information Gateway, where I offer subject matter expertise in stipend programs, housing, annual reporting, and more. Now, Title IV-E stipend programs are an impactful way to support young people as they graduate high school and pursue post-secondary education. These programs can offer paths to the workforce or meaningful relationships with peers and professionals, but marketing them to eligible young people can be a challenge. I remember a moment in my own journey through care where I wasn't even sure if financial support for post-secondary education existed at all. It's a difficult barrier to what is a truly meaningful program. So to help us get a better understanding of how to overcome that challenge, I was joined today by Dr. Justin J. Miller, the Dean of the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky. Dean Miller has supported Kentucky's use of Title IV-E stipends statewide and grown the number of youth participating in stipend programs from 300 to 3,000 since 2019. He shared compelling insights on the importance of marketing stipend programs, not just to young people, but also to their families and other supportive adults to help build excitement and buy-in for pursuing post-secondary education from the whole family unit. Dean Miller also touched on the importance of connecting stipend students with those currently and previously involved in the program to provide a clear vision of the path to a career in social work. His thoughts were captivating, and they speak to the full potential of stipend programs that I think we'll all really enjoy. So, without further ado, let's get into our conversation. Dean Miller, thanks for joining us today.

Dean Miller [00:02:51]: No problem. Thanks very much for having me.

Gabriel [00:02:54]: Yeah, we really appreciate having your time here today to talk about Title IV-E stipend programs and the benefits they can have on both young adults in care and our child serving systems as a whole. We'll get into the weeds just a little bit, but before we do, Dean Miller, can I ask you to just explain the structure of Title IV-E stipend programs in Kentucky and your role in supporting them?

Dean Miller [00:03:23]: Yeah, sure. So, um, at the University of Kentucky, we're home to, uh, a program that I came up with, uh, a few years ago. It's called CW PREP. And CW PREP serves as our Title IV-E, uh, program. Um, structure's, pretty straightforward. Uh, we, um, go out and, uh, recruit folks into, um, social work spaces, uh, most of the time for their junior and senior year. Uh, provide them a stipend, provide them some tuition supports, and really get into the creative structure of supporting them throughout their academic journey. And, uh, you know, we're laser focused on preparing people to be ready for public child welfare jobs on day one. So that means, uh, walking with them through the journey, um, doing, uh, real-time assessments, real-time supports, and then sticking with them as they transition into the professional workspace. So, um, it's, it's pretty, uh, typical in terms of basic structure. I think one of the things that we really try to do with CW PREP is to, um, really build and foster a, a

reframed culture around how we think about child welfare work, and then in turn, how we prepare the workspace to, um, have new workers in it, which is a, a thing that we don't talk about enough.

Gabriel [00:04:40]: Certainly room for a growing conversation around there. It's interesting that you mention, you know, trying to define a culture that can support this. Was there a specific experience or a specific moment that reinforced your commitment to improving child welfare through the use of Title IV-E stipend programs?

Dean Miller [00:05:03]: Um, yeah, absolutely. I think it's, uh, I'll make a, a long story really short. You know, growing up, uh, spent time in out home care, I spent time in kinship care. Um, I literally grew up wanting to be a CPS worker. Um, and I'll, I'll often joke, you know, there are not many things that are for certain in this world, but I am pretty for certain that no one has ever grown up saying that they wanted to be a CPS worker, right? It's just, it's just not a thing that most people, uh, think about. But for me, it was, it was a, a, a mission, uh, driven pursuit. And as I, uh, went to college, graduated, got into the public child welfare space, um, I remember kinda looking around and listening and thinking about how there was really just a negative frame around the work. Um, and so as I, uh, got into the research space and then got into the academic space, I really wanted to, to I say, reframe the way that we thought about the child welfare system. And it was really about public perceptions and what the work, uh, meant. Um, thinking about how we were gonna rename, uh, some of the things that we were doing, and then reclaim the narrative around understanding the importance of the work and getting people to, to, to see it as a, as a viable, meaningful career path, as a way to really make a difference in spaces. And so, um, my own personal experience, of course, shaped the way that I, that I see a lot of that. But then as I've been able to engage with child welfare workers, you know, all over the world, literally, you know, these folks every day save people's lives. Every day. They're often the first responders. And, and we don't, um, give them enough due in that space. We don't talk enough about the importance of it. And I think it, what that has meant is that it can sometimes be hard for people to understand or see themselves in that career space. And so, um, through the work of CW PREP, you know, we, we've really sought to, to change that narrative and to show people the power that is public child welfare, and the possibility that could be, once we get folks in, it.

Gabriel [00:07:17]: Certainly, uh, can't understate the supports that frontline direct response social workers, uh, bring to the day-to-day for the families and the children that they serve. Really interested about the re, “reframe,” “rename” and “reclaim” that you mentioned, uh, you know, working to build the wave behind this movement that we're talking about today. Were there specific steps in that kind of three-pronged process that you wanted to make sure you hit on as you move towards, you know, really bolstering your stipend program?

Dean Miller [00:07:57]: Yeah, I think a lot of it, uh, again, you think about this, the, the reframe space, right? You think about the current perceptions of child welfare there, at best limited, and at worst, they're just downright wrong. And so what we sought to do is reframe the purpose and importance of, uh, child welfare work in general, and more specifically for those in the CW PREP space. Um, in the, the rename piece, we wanted to really think about leveraging, um, contemporary technology and thinking about, um, starting where people are in the recruitment space. Um, so, you know, if, if, if you're not recruiting in the social media, um, spaces today, I, I would argue you're not recruiting. And so really

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thinking about how we could reframe, uh, and rename the job to folks to not just keep going to the same markets that we're always talking about, but to expand the market and allow other people to see themselves in that, in that space. And then again, again, lastly, the reclaim piece was really about seizing the narrative around child welfare work. Um, we can't seed the ground and let other people define what that work is. Uh, we really need to be in a space where we are unapologetic about the fact that, um, child welfare workers are saving lives. There's nothing wrong with saying that 'cause it is a true statement. And then expanding the appeal of public child welfare work in a way that, you know, helps people see its importance and in turn helps people wanna come in and do it. So, um, I, I'm a really big believer in the, the tech engagement space. So to me, technology kind of undergirds all three of those concepts. But, um, the reframe, rename, or reclaim is, is we, we talk about it every day. Uh, to your earlier point, we, we can't understate its importance in terms of being able to pull folks in. And if you think about it, a lot of times, um, you might listen to, to folks in child welfare space, and if you just believed the narrative, you would think nobody would wanna go do that job, right? And so I think, um, telling a different story and telling and talking about the impact in a different way, at least for us, has made all the difference.

Gabriel [00:10:08]: Yeah, absolutely. The resonance, you know, the, the resonance that this work has on, on those who receive these services, um, it's interesting that you discuss really meeting people where they are in the process of pursuing these stipend programs or pursuing services in general. I, myself, was a Title IV-E stipend student, uh, when I was in school, and it connected me to so many amazing things. But, uh, I know from my experience and the experience of my peers, uh, hearing about the programs was the biggest barrier to accessing them even knowing they were real at all.

Dean Miller [00:10:50]: Yeah.

Gabriel [00:10:51]: Um, and so I, I wanted to ask, you know, how do you reach students who may be eligible for these programs? How are you bringing it into their homes?

Dean Miller [00:11:00]: Yeah. Well, um, I, I think number one, you have to be creative. Um, you know, Title IV-E from a policy standpoint, it can be really cumbersome and complex, quite frankly. There, you know, you're, you're talking about old school social security policy there. And so one of the things that we've done is, is taken an approach to, we always say, we, we gotta go get 'em. We gotta go find them. We, we can't sit around and wait for them to come to us. Uh, how are we, um, marketing or what resources are we sharing, or what groups are we talking to so that we ensure that they know? So, for example, um, we've done initiatives, uh, around matriculation agreements with community colleges, thinking about, "Hey, this becomes a way that you finish off your four-year degree space." And research tells us the, the two things that college students are worried about the most. Number one, how they're gonna pay for school. And number two, are they gonna have a job when they graduate? Well, what do you know, IV-E programming helps with both of those. And so we just kind of frame it out in a way that, that meets those needs. Again, you have to be creative in the marketing space. You're thinking about, uh, you know, your, your social media pushes. Um, we've done initiatives where we'll do workshops for parents or grandmothers, um, grandfathers, grandparents who are raising, uh, kin and relatives so that we frame it and show it to them as a way to, um, get a supported education. And, you know, one of the things that we've really tried to do is not get so much into the motivation of why people come to the

work. Um, they're gonna come for a multitude of different reasons. They're gonna participate in IV-E programming for a multitude of different reasons. Um, I've always stood behind the notion that if you are willing to come and do good work in the pursuit of helping children and families, we want you, um, it doesn't, it, it matters not how you got to that, that space. So if you see IV-E programming as a way for you to have some money to go to college, great. Uh, if you see IV-E programming as a way for you to actualize a personal mission that you've had, great. We, we want all of those things, 'cause at the end of the day, it helps us get to a space where we are able to pull in an individual who is gonna go on to be a worker, who is gonna go on to positively impact a family. And at the end of the day, that's the most important thing.

Gabriel [00:13:28]: I love the idea of marketing, not just to the student, not just to the prospective worker, but really the whole family, um, and the whole family individually.

Dean Miller [00:13:39]: Yeah.

Gabriel [00:13:40]: Right. It, it's about, uh, making sure that everyone's aware of what's out there, everyone's aware of what can be done to support the, the young people in their lives. Has there been a lot of success in marketing to parents, to grandparents? Um, could you take us through what that's looked like for Kentucky?

Dean Miller [00:14:00]: Yeah. So I think, you know, we're, we're in this space now where we're, we're just starting to see, uh, a lot of the, the fruits of, of some of these seeds that we've planted in these, these really kind of alternative or differential, uh, marketing approaches. And if you just think about kind of basic human behavior and how we go about making decisions and lives, we're, we're typically engaged with our peers or with family members. And so just ensuring that folks have that information for us, we've been able to see, um, instances or examples where, um, I tell a story, there was a, there was a grandmother that I was, uh, working with in the kinship space, and, uh, she was caring for her grandchild who was coming up on college age and was, you know, working on college applications and, uh, talking about where she was gonna go to school. And the grandmother had learned about the Title IV-E programming and CW PREP, and was just very clear with her, her granddaughter, like, look, you're, you're gonna go up here and you're gonna get this money and you're gonna go to school, 'cause otherwise it was gonna be a struggle. And she didn't know how she was gonna make tuition, how, how she was gonna pay, uh, those bills. And so, you know, we're at a point now where we're starting to see those folks come through. And I think planting the seed in all different parts of the continuum. So we've been doing outreach in high school spaces to think about how to get folks into a, a public child welfare career. Now, you gotta think about it, you're kind of selling two concepts in some places. Number one, we gotta sell folks on the concept of they can come to college, and then number two, once they're there, we need you to come into this child welfare space. Right? And so I think that's where it's, it's been, uh, we, we've had some really positive impact in being able to talk about it in different ways to different people, and at the end of the day, not losing sight of the positive benefit that it can be. And I, I think, you know, to what you may have been hinting at earlier, we've, we've had the challenge in some spaces that people, they think it's too good to be true. They don't, they almost don't believe that it's a thing that you could get tuition support and get a stipend and have a job. And so it's been interesting, uh, the number of people that I've talked to that have heard about the program, but didn't really think it was a thing.

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They, they just thought it was something that somebody come up with or, or that they might not qualify for, for whatever reason. So, um, you know, that, that outreach and that differential, um, marketing and messaging is just been really, really important. And to me, it's, it's really what's gonna help moving forward, uh, open up and expand concepts and ideas related to IV-E support.

Gabriel [00:16:44]: That certainly I think makes sense and certainly, you know, follows a track. Um, I know in my own experiences, uh, I didn't believe they were real, and I entered college, uh, and had to work full time next to a full, you know, class load, full coursework. Um, and it was, it was really something.

Dean Miller [00:17:06]: How did you, uh, how did you learn about IV-E?

Gabriel [00:17:10]: Well, it's interesting, I was connected with my local youth advisory board, and I had never heard of a youth advisory board. I had never heard of Title IV-E. And when I had heard of, of it, it was too policy for me.

Dean Miller [00:17:24]: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Gabriel [00:17:25]: Um, but through attending a few youth advisory board meetings, it, it ultimately began to connect. And I realized that this is a real thing. This is a thing that my peers are already accessing and are telling me that I need to get on. Um, and I was lucky enough that I wasn't too old by the time that I found out about it.

Dean Miller [00:17:44]: Awesome. Well, I, I think you bring up a point, you know, it's funny, we, our, our program, it's, it's, we get called CW PREP, and then we have CW SUSTAIN, that's our graduate side IV-E, um, uh, program. But just even in changing the name or, or calling it something different, like when you say to me Title IV-E, I don't really know if I wanna participate in that. Right? But when you say CW PREP, I'm like, okay, I wanna hear more about what that is. So again, that framing is really, really important. And as it sounds like was, was true in your experience.

Gabriel [00:18:15]: Yeah.

Dean Miller [00:18:16]: Just, um, sometimes we, we let our smarts get in the way of our good common sense.

Gabriel [00:18:22]: Mm-hmm.

Dean Miller [00:18:23]: Right? Just laying it out, plain and, um, you know, understanding where people are and, and you're right, how do we make this not sound like a cumbersome, complicated policy?

Gabriel [00:18:32]: Yeah.

Dean Miller [00:18:33]: Um, how do we make this, uh, more of a supportive program that's designed around, um, getting people into school, helping them through school, and then getting 'em into the professional space. I think it's...

Gabriel [00:18:43]: Yeah.

Dean Miller [00:18:44]: It makes all the difference.

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Gabriel [00:18:47]: Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, it's framing it proper and framing it so it's distinct. I really like the CW PREP versus CW SUSTAIN, you know, the first is getting you in there. The second is making sure you stick around.

Dean Miller [00:19:02]: Yeah.

Gabriel [00:19:03]: And I think that distinction is really valuable.

Dean Miller [00:19:05]: Yes. And we've been very intentional. I, I call it the a, a professional continuum, right? So you think about it, we, we bring 'em in for CW PREP, we afford 'em these supports. And again, we're really intentional about building community. Uh, you know, we do a big, um, a big retreat every year. We bring all of the, uh, CW PREP participants into Louisville, and we call it, we call it PREP UP, is what we call it. Like, again, the whole concept of we want you to be day one ready for the job. Uh, but it's, it's at that time, we start talking to them about what a continuum in the public child welfare space looks like. So you think about it, you get into the job space, you know, you're, you're working hard. You're, you're doing your thing. You're two or three years in and research tells us, you know, that's, that's kind of when folks will start thinking about or looking into other job spaces potentially. And just about the time that's happening, we kind of reintroduced this concept of CW SUSTAIN. So now we've, we've gotten you through undergrad. Now you're a couple, few years in, let's think about a graduate degree. You kind of participate in a similar program, similar supports. Uh, next thing you know, you're seven, eight years into a career, you've had all this degree support, no, or very few student loans, right? 'Cause we've covered your tuition. And, uh, it, it, it to me is the, the, the best way to lay it out is to, to think about it along that continuum space so that it truly does become a way we sustain workers once they're into the professional workspace.

Gabriel [00:20:34]: That's so interesting. I mean I, I really enjoy that framing. By the time that you kind of realize what's around you, your feet are wet in the process. You're in it, you see the positive supports that go into the work. And I, I really, um, resonate with the retreat that you mentioned. I think a thing that I hold really close to my heart is not just the supports that I received from Title IV-E stipend programs, but the people I met, uh, the professionals I was connected with, and the peers that I was connected with. It was those people that drove me to everything that, you know, I pursued during and after, uh, being a member of those stipend programs. The retreat sounds really interesting, have you noticed a, a big impact from connecting current, uh, members of the stipend program to other members, to former members, or to professionals?

Dean Miller [00:21:38]: Absolutely. I mean, it's, it's, um, we, we've, uh, went about the business of trying to really make it a thing, right? So we want it to be a time that's, that's fun. There's a lot of energy. We are able to get our training done in a very different way, you know, because we're thinking about it as a, as, as much more of a conference. Um, we bake in all kinds of, uh, peer connection type activities as well as, you know, the, the professional spaces. We, we walk people through job interviews. You get your professional headshot, you can get your resume reviewed, all the things that kind of sometimes fall by the wayside, or we assume that folks are getting somewhere else. Uh, but it's, it's made a huge difference in terms of connections, in terms of people being able to see public child welfare in a different light. You see people having fun with it and cutting up with it. Um, and we le, we lean into the challenges of it, which I think is a, um, an interesting dynamic to think about in the context of a retreat, because to

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your point, these folks, not, not only are they connected with people who go to the same school as them, but they're connected to folks across the state who are in similar life spaces. And so, um, you know, last, at the last, uh, PREP UP retreat, we had some folks who had graduated and been in the job for a year, we brought them back. And so it was just really powerful for them to be able to tell the folks who were right in the core, right behind them, you know, what they should be thinking about or what they should be prepared for. So it, it's made a world of difference in, um, you know, re-concepting the, the culture of what it looks like to be a, a child welfare prospect moving into the professional space. And we've, uh, again, been unapologetic about, we, we wanna make public child welfare the cool, sexy thing to do. And, you know, you, you have to go about the business of, uh, laying it out that way. And so, uh, it, it's, it's made a huge difference and folks have a lot of fun with it, including me. I, I love going there and cutting up with folks and listening to their story about how they learned about the program or how they came to be into the child welfare space, and more importantly, perhaps what they're looking for as they move into the space. Uh, we've also started to open it up to, uh, as a almost a recruiting platform. So, for folks who may be interested, we bring them in and let them kind of see a different space in the child welfare arena. Um, so it's been really good for, you know, we'll, we'll have, um, in, in Kentucky, you, you typically will come into the program as a junior in your undergraduate space. Um, so we'll have, you know, groups of sophomores who will, who have started coming to participate. And we use it as a recruitment tool for them to get to see a different side of, of child welfare and what we're doing. So it's a fun time all around. If you're ever in Kentucky, you should... Hey, let me know, you should stop on by. It'll, it'll be a good time.

Gabriel [00:24:27]: Perfect. I'm sure we all will. That's incredible. I mean, I was going to say, it's one thing to connect via technology via email or via Zoom. It's another thing to meet someone in person and be able to discuss. It's another thing to be able to sit with them and have the evening or have the weekend with them. And then you mentioned that you're bringing perspective students or perspective, uh, stipend recipients into the fold as well. And that's, I think, really incredible, um, giving them a chance to see, uh, the positivity behind these programs, giving them a chance to hear stories firsthand. That's really interesting. And I'm sure the answer is what we would expect, but I imagine that even just bringing them to those retreats has ramped up the, the attention towards stipend programs that much further.

Dean Miller [00:25:27]: Oh, yeah. You know, re, recruitment is a, is an action word. You, you, you have to, again, I think far too many times we, we sit around and wait for folks to come find us, and this is just yet another way that we can open up pathways. And yeah, you do see a different excitement and, and even being open to the fact that not all of the folks will come into, uh, CW PREP, but what we find is there's always a secondary market or a tertiary market, I think, to your story. You know, somebody telling you about it. Um, or we'll, we'll see folks, you know, they were starting to see major changes where they were in one major. Now they've changed into, uh, one of ours to be in PREP. Um, simply because they kind of see a pathway to a professional career. And again, when you can have fun doing it and be supported, uh, it's just a game changer in terms of how folks will think about programming.

Gabriel [00:26:23]: Yeah. Makes it that much more impactful. Makes it that much more important to you as an individual. That's so interesting. You speak of all of this connection and this statewide collaboration that you've been able to inspire. I think that's something that states around the country would be fascinated by and, and really, uh, wish to strive towards in their own Title IV-E stipend programs.

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[00:26:55]: The benefits, the Title IV-E stipend programs offer can't be understated. And as Dean Miller shared, the best way to connect eligible young adults with these programs is to show them all there is to be excited about. Whether it's pursuing a dream of post-secondary education, finding real pathways to meaningful work, connecting young adults with their peers, or getting an entire family excited about their young adult pursuit of education. Stipend programs can play a key role in supporting successful transitions to adulthood. I encourage everyone to head over to the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at childwelfare.gov. While you're there, stop by our resource library to find a suite of helpful and impactful information on how you can build, maintain, and sustain your own Title IV-E stipend programs. There's also plenty of other information from across the child welfare continuum available in our library. Please don't forget to also subscribe to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast and keep an eye out for part two of our conversation with Dean Miller, where we'll discuss building organizational cohesion to support Title IV-E stipend programs. Thanks again to Dr. Justin J. Miller for such great insight into the heart of Title IV-E stipend programs in Kentucky. And thank you for joining us today. I'm Gabriel Foley, wishing everyone a great day.