

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – Finding the Heart of Title IV-E with Dean Miller Part 2
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 back to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. My name's Gabriel Foley, and I've taken the mantle as the host of your Information Gateway podcast. I've both personal and professional connection with child welfare, having grown up in care and pursued my own journey of permanency. And now part of the wonderful team at Information Gateway, where I offer subject matter expertise in stipend programs, housing, annual reporting, and plenty more. This is part two of our series on finding the heart of Title IV-E stipend programs, which offer meaningful pathways to educational opportunities, careers in social work, and impactful relationships with peers and professionals that all support young people and their path towards success. We're joined in this conversation by Dr. Justin J. Miller, the Dean of the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky. Dean Miller has supported Kentucky's Title IV-E stipend program in its growth from 300 stipends to 3,000 stipends since 2019. In our last episode, he offered some intriguing and innovative ways to market stipend programs to eligible young adults and shared how to engage young adults as they pursue their education. Now, Dean Miller shares his thoughts on how child welfare agencies can build support for stipend programs from across their teams. Doing so can make stipend programs more accessible and worker recruitment more efficient. We have plenty more insights into how to build and maintain Title IV-E stipend programs to share. So, without further ado, let's jump right back into our conversation with Dean Miller. What advice would you recommend to other states looking to either establish or amplify their own Title IV-E stipend programs? Is there anything that you wish you knew at the beginning that you know now?

Dean Miller [00:02:25]: Yeah, I'll say I was very fortunate in the sense that in, in Kentucky, we've really been, um, laser-focused on the mission. Meaning the mission is to ensure that we have a dynamic, supported, vibrant child welfare workforce. And if you keep your eye on that, everything else becomes secondary. So there's always the small "p" politics of collaboration and this institution working with that institution... And, and to be honest, we just kind of pushed all those to the side and said, we're gonna stay focused on the thing that's important. And I think that, that's step number one, is to realize that the thing is bigger than all of us. And if we don't do what we need to do, there's gonna be a family down the road that doesn't get a service because there's not a worker to do it. And when you, again, put it in that context, um, it, it becomes somewhat easier to get to a space where you understand that it, it's gotta be all of us. Uh, say, you know, child welfare is not a, not a someone challenge. It's an everyone challenge. And so it's gonna take everyone being involved in the solution. Um, number two, I, I think we have to remember and understand the contemporary workspace. What we used to do to recruit folks into workspaces will not work now. The biggest difference between people, uh, in my opinion, is not race, and it's not gender, is generational. So thinking about, um, you know, I remember I went to a recruitment event early on. Uh, it was a, a different state, uh, state government working on recruiting public child welfare workers, and the first workshop they had was a retirement workshop. Like, here's your retirement benefit, right? What? At 20, I wasn't thinking about a retirement benefit. Like that just sounded like a boring thing to me. So that might not be the best foot to put forward when you're thinking about how we're gonna, um, recruit in and bring in folks. So thinking about the tech spaces, thinking about, um, we have a CW PREP ambassador program where we, we trained current students to

be ambassadors, and so they go out and help talk about and share information about CW PREP. So, uh, you know, number one, recognizing that it's bigger than all of us, and that getting to a collaborative space and understanding, you know, keep keeping our eye on the mission is really important. Um, number two, understanding that the workspace is different. So we have to recruit different, we have to support different, we have to think about how we're messaging in a different way. Uh, and then I think number three, and as I said earlier, this doesn't get talked enough about, we have to ensure that we're preparing the workspace to have these new workers. We could go through all of this programming, we could do everything in this big, creative tech tech-innovative way, and it does us no good if they get to the job and don't stay. So we really have to work with, um, the, the current workspaces and supervisors and, uh, teammates and things to ensure that all of us are ready for, you know, where these new workers are and what they're coming in and what they know versus what they don't know, how we can prepare and support them. Um, not just the new, new folks, but the, the folks who've been there for a while, in terms of, you know, what, what their job situations are looking like. So I think if we focus on, on those three things, the, the, the collaboration piece, the creative engagement, and then preparing these workspaces to have these new workers, I think those are the things that if you, if you can focus on those, you'll end up in a really good space. Um, as a, as an aside, I, I will say one of the things we've done with PREP is, is really try to think about it being jurisdiction agnostic. So, to think about how can we put together a programmatic initiative that could scale or could be replicated. So we're talking to states now about, "Hey, here, here's the framework. Just, just do it there." I think a lot of times we talk about capacity building in the work workspace, um but uh sometimes capacity building means you just, you just do it and, and give it to folks or share it with folks or whatever it may be. So I think that another really important thing is to, to be inquisitive about things that are already out there that you could use or leverage. Um, we're across jurisdictions, we're, uh, more the same than not. And so a lot of the things that we've done, we'll work in other spaces. And, um, the, the teams that I work with, they're really happy to share out and support, uh, folks who are, who are trying to do similar work.

Gabriel [00:06:59]: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. You, you can practice as much as you want, but your practice has to be in spirit of the game. You, you have to go out and do it at some point. I think you get to that well. Uh, is there, you mentioned, uh, preparing workspaces for new workers, for incoming workers, is there a process that you go through, uh, to really make sure that new workers are being directed to where the need is rather than pulling up in Lexington or, or any of these other urban areas in Kentucky?

Dean Miller [00:07:36]: Yeah, so we do a lot around, um, you know, a lot of the, the, the planning that goes into something like a Title IV-E program, you, you have to be thinking about, it's not just about having workers, it's about having them when and where you need them. And so we spent a lot of time thinking about prototyping, um, and, and, uh, working with students to understand what they're good at, where they wanna be, what interests them. And so, you know, we're in some jurisdiction where, where we have specialized workers, so we have folks who will do investigations, and they're in a space to where that's what they like, that's what moves them. And that's different than foster parent recruitment, right? And so spending some time with workers on the front side or potential workers on the front side to really understand and assess where they want to be. Um, but then working with, um, teams to see and understand who or what they need. So, you know, um, we, we are into the space now, we're working on a, a project where we're looking at a, we're calling it the Retention Propensity Index. So thinking about, um, you know, if there's a team that everyone seems to leave, no one seems to stay, what, what is it about that we, we can't just ignore that. Let's, let's figure out how we can support these

teams in retaining, uh, workers. So, um, you know, going through the steps of preparing the workers, uh, or students for the work that they're going into, understanding the, the nuances there, and then matching that with what the teams need or, you know, frankly, we've, we've gotten into looking at supervisor types and worker types and, you know, sometimes people mesh and sometimes they don't and there's nothing wrong with that. It's just a, a part of being a human, right. And so if we know that and have information to that effect, why, why wouldn't we use it to, to, to figure out where we can have folks? Um, you mentioned some geography. You know, we have folks who, uh, do our different educational apparatus. Um, you know, sometimes if they leave the rural areas, they're never going back to that rural area. That's just it, it's shown in the data. And so we look at ways to train and educate them where they are so that they can then stay there and work. Um, so there's a, there's a bunch of small things like that, that we try to pay attention to, and, um, we've gotten into some really creative models, and so it's just allowed us to respond in a different way. And I think at the end of the day, everybody's in a better space for it. The, the teams are, are more supported, you know, frustrated, uh, supervisors might not be as frustrated with having a new worker, or a new worker might not be as frustrated with having a, their supervisor. Um, and I will say at the end of the day, we don't, we don't run away from the things that just are, we, we, we really lean into those. We, we, we don't sugarcoat, uh, the job, uh, when, you know, it is not appropriate. We, um, talk about the dynamic tension sometimes between supervisors and new workers. Um, and we try to get to the business of finding solutions and supports to deal with those things.

Gabriel [00:10:43]: That's so telling, I think, you know, there's going to be anxieties in a new workspace. There's going to be frustrations, there's going to be people clashes, you know, we've all had jobs that we loved and jobs that we did not love adamantly, so, um, it's interesting that you lean into that, that you don't let those feelings get pushed to the back room. You know, they do exist, and they are real and valid. And I think it's very telling to the positive, uh, uh, direction or positive sentiment of your program, that those negative feelings can be acknowledged in a way that's supportive of everyone involved.

Dean Miller [00:11:27]: Yeah, and I, it starts early on, like one of the things that we do, um, for folks who are thinking about CW PREP, um, you know, we, we have a, a virtual reality, uh, investigator simulation we put together a few years ago, um, and so we'll let people tinker around or, or, or go through a sequence. And really, what we're doing is working with them to kind of assess and see, like, is, is this job for you? Like, uh, let, let's be honest, uh, we're investing a lot of resources into individuals to support them and then get them into the workspace. So we're, we're trying to, you know, through some critical assessments and critical self-reflection, quite frankly, get to a spot where, um, folks are able to make informed decisions about what the work's gonna be. And so, you know, kind of shifting that, that, um, that keep it real moment, uh, earlier in the program and, uh, so before the, before folks apply, before they submit their, uh, paperwork, uh, we wanna make sure that they understand all the possibilities of the job and to ensure that that's in line with what they wanna do or where they wanna be. So we've, we've found that through some of these exercises, folks are like, "Absolutely not. I, I can't do that." And I think that's just as good as the folks we find that can, you need to know what you can't do as well as what you can do. And so, uh, again, I think a lot of folks, they run away from that part, or they, they shy away from that part. And what it means is you get somebody, they're halfway through the program, and then they leave, or they get into the job, and then they leave. And we just, we don't wanna do that. We wanna, we want everybody to be informed and make a good decision for them, 'cause ultimately, I wholeheartedly believe that's what's gonna be good for children and families.

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Gabriel [00:13:12]: Yeah. Well, our, our time Dean Miller is drawing, uh, to its end. Um, so I, I wanted to make sure we, you know, put a nice bow on the conversation, ask you after, you know, talking this through, after, uh, listening to the, the conversation at hand, uh, what do you hope people do? What do you hope professionals, uh, do in response to hearing all this great work around stipend programs?

Dean Miller [00:13:43]: At the end of the day, I hope folks, number one, understand the potential and promise of stipend programming. Um, there are very few programs like it, and I, I, I would, would wish that, that people would, um, you know, uh, understand it for, for what it is to see it as a, as a support for folks who are interested in going into an impactful career. And then once they understand that, or maybe even if they don't understand it, I want 'em to share it with some, with somebody, 'cause I, I do think the more we can talk about it and spread it around and get people to be inquisitive about it, I think the better off we are. I want people to see it as a mechanism for them to go to school. It, it's, it's not just about what you do once you're, once you're there, um, I want folks who are in two-year programs to think about it as a way or a possibility for them to finish a four-year degree. Um, you know, we, we are in a space now where we're expanding to degrees other than social work. I want folks to understand and see that it just doesn't have to be one degree. Um, so, you know, if I, if I had to sum it up, it's just, I, I implore folks to take the time to understand what is possible with IV-E and to share that with people so that they can actualize those possibilities.

Gabriel [00:15:06]: Yeah, absolutely. Succinctly put, certainly so, uh, life-changing is the term that I've used when talking to my peers about these stipend programs. You mentioned it earlier, but even if you're not pursuing them, even if you take in the information and think it's not, for me, just being in the conversation, being in the room where a stipend program is being discussed is a rare opportunity to connect with peers in the, the same boat. And that's so I think, hard to come by or hard to dig up on your own as a young person in care.

Dean Miller [00:15:47]: Yeah. Well, and if I'm thinking about young people too, I say, you know, it, it's, it's not a forever program, but it has forever impact. Uh, I mean, literally, so you think about folks who, um, they, they may just need the degree support and they're willing to go out and do a good impactful job. Now, do we want them to stay? Absolutely. We, we need to create job spaces where people wanna stay in work careers. But, you know, from what we know in the contemporary workspace is that it, it's very seldom that employees graduating now are going and staying at a place for 20, 25 years. You know, as much as we wanna hold onto, those days are just over.

And so, thinking about what it looks like to have a continuum or to say, um, I remember myself, I was, when I went to interview for my public child welfare job, this is no joke, you can't make this up. I, during the interview, I told the supervisor there at the time, her name was Grace, uh, she was interviewing me and I said, "Well, look, um, I only wanna work for you for about six or seven years. I said, now I will give you everything I got. I will do everything you tell me to do for those six or seven years, but after that, I wanna go on and do something else." And I, I think most folks who would've interviewed me in that space, they would've said, no, never mind, we want people who are gonna stay 20 years. But, but she didn't. And I, and I'm very appreciative to this day of that because we do need people who come in for five, six years, do really, really good work, and then transition on. Um, so if, if they see that this is a, this program has a forever impact, but it doesn't have to be a forever thing if you don't want it to be, we still end up in a better spot, uh, than where we were. Uh, again, I wholeheartedly believe we need to create job spaces where people want to stay, and we can sustain and, and retain them. But I also think that we

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have to be realistic and open to, if you wanna do a good job and you want to actualize your commitment we, we want you.

Gabriel [00:17:51]: I love it, talk about a defined five-year plan. Isn't that what they always ask for?

Dean Miller [00:17:57]: Exactly.

Gabriel [00:17:58]: But that's so interesting, I mean, as long as the work is being done to its fullest, as long as it's being done well, wouldn't we want that passion, that drive, um, that excitement to explore innovations and new things, uh, being the ones to do the work? Um, it's so telling.

Dean Miller [00:18:18]: Yeah. When, if you think about it, what, the more you talk it through, you realize that, the recruitment part is one piece of it, creating a workspace that people wanna stay is a separate piece. They're, they're connected, but it's very separate. And so I think that, um, these, these IV-E programs can contribute to both of those things. But, uh, to your point, um, I mean, I take myself, if, if, if I had stayed, if that space, I wouldn't be sitting there talking to you now, right? Like, I wouldn't have been in a space to think about a CW PREP program. I wouldn't have been in a space to think about how we can get lived experience folks into the jobs to support them. I, so I, again, I think that people contribute in a lot of different ways. And I, I will say that the time I did CPS work, it, it was the most impactful professionally for my career, I learned the most, uh, uh, of any other space I've ever been in. And it impacts the work I do, uh, even today. So, um, yeah, we, we, we need to take good work where we can get it.

Gabriel [00:19:20]: Yeah, absolutely. Well, is there anything that we didn't touch on today, anything that you would want to share with individuals interested in building their own stipend programs that you haven't had an opportunity to?

Dean Miller [00:19:39]: You know, I think we've touched on it all. I would say that there are people willing to help, uh, reach out, uh, there, there's, uh, no, no bad ideas most of the time in these spaces, so, uh, let's all partner to think about how we can creatively do it different.

Gabriel [00:19:54]: Beautiful. I think that's a great way to end it. I don't think that you mentioned throughout our conversation, but, uh, I believe in, in talking before we started recording, you mentioned that you'd grown your stipend program, uh, almost tenfold. Um, in, in everything that we've described today, going from reframe, rename, reclaim to, uh, speaking with, uh, young people, to speaking with their families, um, to involving them with those actively in the program and then, uh, turning that into good work being done, uh, in the social work field. That's so interesting, I, I think, uh, a beautiful summation of what Title IV-E stipend programs can provide. I'll say...

Dean Miller [00:20:44]: Absolutely.

Gabriel [00:20:45]: That is, uh, that's the end of our questions, that's the end of my list. Anything that you wanted to add? Apologies.

Dean Miller [00:20:52]: No, thank you. Uh, thank you for, uh, taking the time and space to, uh, share information and, uh, for being willing to, uh, you know, creatively put together, a podcast. Uh, you know, I'm a big believer in, uh, strategic dissemination and getting information out where it needs to be. So, uh, thanks for taking the time to help, uh, share the message. I'm sure somebody will listen to this

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who didn't know about IV-E before, and will be educated because of it. So, uh, know that, uh, you and your team are making an impact and it's appreciated.

Gabriel [00:21:22]: Absolutely. Well, same directly back to you. I think a, a much more quantifiable impact, perhaps, but thank you.

Dean Miller [00:21:29]: Uh, no problem. Thank you very much.

Gabriel [00:21:33]: Title IV-E stipend programs are a great way to support young people in their pursuit of education and employment, but they're also a great tool for child welfare agencies looking to address turnover, build capacity, or address needs before they arise. We've heard from Dean Miller of the University of Kentucky about how much growth can come from the right organizational buy-in, that we hope can inform the work of your own child welfare team. For more, head over to the Information gateway [website@childwelfare.gov](https://www.childwelfare.gov). There you can find the Information Gateway Resource Library, which contains a suite of information on building and maintaining Title IV-E stipend programs, as well as resources, tip sheets, and toolkits spanning topics from across the child welfare continuum. The Information Gateway Team again, thanks Dr. Justin Miller for joining us to discuss such a meaningful conversation. And we thank all of you for being here as well. We hope to see you again soon. My name's Gabriel Foley, and I'm wishing you all a great day.