

Korina Barry (00:26):

Boozho, hello everyone. Thank you for tuning into the cashew podcast channel. My name is Korina Barry and I am the Director of Outreach at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. We oftentimes call ourselves cashew for sure. We are a research and training center located within the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota. And this week we are bringing you a brand new series. The series will be focused on how COVID-19 is impacting the child welfare system across the state of Minnesota. So in the coming weeks I will be sitting down with state leadership. I'll be sitting down with County managers, supervisors and frontline child protection workers, students who are in masters of social work programs and our Title IV-E scholars and others to hear about how COVID-19 is rapidly changing their day to day work, their personal lives, the children and families that they're serving. You will also hear more about how these folks are coping and what is giving them hope during really challenging times. And so we hope that you find this series helpful, that you're able to pull out tools and resources for yourselves and bring them into your work, into your families and your communities. And we look forward to getting you more updates on what these real time changes are looking like in child welfare practice in Minnesota. So thank you for tuning in.

Korina Barry (01:56):

in today's episode I will be sitting down with Traci LaLiberte who is the Executive Director at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. And we will hear more from her about how the pandemic is impacting the work of the center and just a little more general information on how the pandemic is impacting child welfare across our state. How are you doing and how are you adjusting to everything? All the changes happening right now?

Traci LaLiberte (02:27):

You know, I think I'm adjusting as much as anybody else is. Um, it's definitely been a shift from the normal way that we do work and trying to integrate home life on top of what we're doing at work is, I'm sure it's challenging for me as it is for anybody else. And so it's just about trying to give myself enough grace that I can figure it out at the same time. Um, and I'm moving things forward.

Korina Barry (02:59):

Yeah. Could you share a little bit more about how COVID-19 has impacted the work of the center? The work of CASCW?

Traci LaLiberte (03:09):

Sure. I think that, uh, we started to do some planning at the very early stages of um, the social distancing and trying to win as the state tried to get ready for COVID-19 social distancing. And some of the things that we did were really about, uh, addressing upcoming events. And, uh, at first talking about creating postponements and then eventually thinking about how it is that we could do training and reach and support the workforce in different ways using online technology. So whether that's a podcast series or shifting our spring event, that's a big training event too, from in-person to webinar type statuses, shorter, smaller, um, amounts of training have been some of some of the things that we've been doing. I think that the workforce in particular is really overwhelmed at this point in time trying to do what I described at the beginning and trying to find new normal, trying to balance what you're doing at home with what your work responsibilities are. And the reality is people don't have the ability to spend six or eight hours at a training right now. And so for us to be able to be thinking, um, smartly about how it is that we can meet people's needs, short trainings, but things that continue to enhance

people's ability to do their work, especially during these challenging times is what we're trying to focus on.

Korina Barry (04:47):

Yeah, we've been hearing.. I think a lot or there's just a lot of information in general and we're hearing I think a lot of um, practices or practice change and policy change taking place in response to COVID-19 locally here in Minnesota and nationally. Um, are there any particular practice or policy changes that have stood out to you that you've heard of or even just imagine are on the radar with all the changes happening right now?

Traci LaLiberte (05:19):

I think a significant change is the face to face visits. Um, whether they're home visits with kids living at home with their families and well-child checks to um, monthly visits with kids who are in placement and investigations and for counties and tribes to be figuring out, um, what does that look like and what, what are the standards, what are the expectations both federally and from a state perspective as well as what their own expectations are within their community has been, um, challenging. It's important, like you said, information is coming fast and furious. It's drinking from a fire hose. And I think for folks to be able to weed through what all that information is to best understand which pieces they have to be paying most attention to has been a challenge. So I think just the amount of information and everybody trying to do the right thing is in and of itself a challenge.

Traci LaLiberte (06:17):

But I do think in child protection in particular, being able to figure out how to keep the workforce safe while the workforce is still out on the front lines as essential staff responding to investigations and reports of maltreatment. And for those folks who can work remotely, how is it that they do televisits and what is required in televisits, what's the best practice and televisits, um, what does the state expect? What are the feds allow, uh, able to allow us to do figuring all those pieces out and then communicating it in a way that people can receive that information and then implement it. I think that's been kind of the biggest challenge that we've seen in Minnesota.

Korina Barry (07:02):

So related to the child welfare workforce, but thinking more along the lines of our future workforce, could you share a little bit about how our Title IV-E Fellows are being impacted by COVID-19, us being just one of the universities in Minnesota that support title for you fellows, um, and are seeing their lives being impacted as well?

Traci LaLiberte (07:24):

Sure. I think that there's quite a, an enormous impact on students right now in general. The university of Minnesota was the first university within the state to, um, start to curtail, um, campus visits and then, uh, in person classes and switching things over to distance learning. And so we really had to get in front of the curve on that in general in terms of social work classes and things that the, the Title IV-E Fellows had to be attending to. I think one of the biggest element as, as faculty have figured that out and students have been flexible and figuring out what that looks like. The, the consistent challenges field and field of course field or internships are of course the pedagogy, um, the central pedagogy of, of social work. And so really trying to figure out how is it that students can continue their learning and can continue to honor the relationships that they've established over the course of the year with kids and

families for some kind of continuity of service provision is really challenging in part because students are, um, the work of students in their field.

Traci LaLiberte (08:38):

Placement and internship is governed by the university, but it's also governed by whatever County or tribe or private agency that they're working at. And so we're having to individually, for every single student, try to help figure out what is the balance between what work can they do at home. Are they in a position that is considered essential from the County perspective? And yet the student isn't considered essential. So how do they honor that work and continue to support the County in the work it needs to do while I'm also adhering to what the university protocols and expectations are for students not being out in, in the field and putting themselves, um, uh, in a, in a position that could compromise their social distancing. And so, um, I think that's a big challenge as we get ready. This is a very busy time of year for title 40 fellows as they're wrapping up their school year and, and doing some in person learning around how do, how do we work best in native American communities?

Traci LaLiberte (09:38):

Um, how are we working best in African American communities? Some of our experiential learning had to be canceled and that was really disappointing. I think for students, that's a high point of the year that they look forward to. And we're also accepting new students and people are trying to plan for next year and what does a field placement look like next year? And, and that feels really burdensome. And overwhelming to counties to try to figure out how do they do the work that they're doing right now and how do they plan for students for next year and can they even plan for students for next year. Um, and I think counties are trying really hard to not say no because they know a lot can change between now and then and yet schools really have this need to be able to communicate with students around planning for next year. And the best that we've been able to do is for folks to come together and to again say, you know what, we're going to have some grace, we're going to have some flexibility, we're going to figure this out. There's going to be a lot of things that change coming up. And um, you know, it's day by day as far as some of those things go for our students. And that's hard. It's a hard way to, to be in the world.

Korina Barry (10:47):

You mentioned previously some of the concerns or worries you have about the impact all of this is having on the workforce more broadly. Things like worker safety and gaps in training. And other needed supports. I'm just wondering if there are other concerns or worries you have. Uh, you know, I know where we're living day by day and many unknowns and so there isn't a lot to know in the short term or long-term, but if they're just other thoughts you have.

Traci LaLiberte (11:14):

You know, it's interesting, I had a conversation with some staffers, um, in Senator Klobuchar's office earlier this week and one of the things that we talked about was, was this very thing what, you know, what are some more generalized concerns and things that perhaps from a national standpoint we could be looking at from a policy standpoint. And for me, the thing that really stands out is, um, that child welfare workers are deemed and considered to be essential workers and yet there isn't very much out there to support this workforce in doing that work as there are, as there might be for other professions. So, you know, we, we know what the struggles are with the profession and yet there's lots of information and lots of support being developed and planned for that field. Um, in our field, you know, people say, well, you know, use personal protection and go out and do that visit. But what, what does

that look like when you're in someone's home? Right there, they're not, it's not like a patient coming to a facility. These workers are going into homes where we don't know what the exposure has been for the kids, the parents, um, extended relatives. Um, you know, people are living in, um, situations that they're not typically living in as well.

Traci LaLiberte (12:30):

I think having a designation as first responders is a consideration that as a field we need to be pursuing when this is all over. I don't know that this is necessarily the time to do that, but I do think we need to have some serious conversations either at a state level, from a policy perspective or some advocacy nationally that that child protection workers, child welfare workers do get a designation as first responders because there is a level of support that comes with that designation that our workforce currently doesn't have. And, um, and I think that, you know, thinking toward the future, we need that.

Korina Barry (13:13):

Absolutely. That would, that would be huge. And I think bring a lot more protections and support for the workforce and very unexpected, unprecedented situations like this that we're currently in. Child welfare is not the only workforce or system and being impacted of course by COVID-19. We're seeing other areas, um, in ways that children and families in our state and nationally are being impacted. Can you share a little bit more about kind of what are some of those, um, kind of key areas we're seeing, um, kind of key issues surfacing or being, um, magnified during this time?

Traci LaLiberte (13:53):

Sure. I think, you know, child welfare tends, seems to be a place where many social issues all come together or they come to a head, um, in some regard in terms of families when they're in crisis or, um, have additional stressors on them. And so I think that this is a very high risk time for kids and families in the state of Minnesota. And I think that applies to all kids and all families, that they're seeing an additional level of risk that people may not have experienced before. Um, they're making choices. And maybe I'm reacting in ways that, that are not normal for them. And they have, uh, a reduced capacity for stress. And all of those things contribute to risk factors for kids experiencing maltreatment. So I do think that today, for instance, we heard, um, some statements coming out of the world health organization about, um, skyrocketing rates and reports of domestic violence.

Traci LaLiberte (14:49):

Well domestic violence. Um, you know, in our parallel with child maltreatment reports is they're incredibly correlated and, um, that gives me a lot of concern. It gives me a lot of concern for what's happening in kids and families, the stress that parents are feeling and how that plays out. Um, in families that may already have had economic insecurity. Now people who've lost their jobs, people don't have health insurance in the same regard. And these things are just cascading impacts, um, on the level of stress that families are experiencing. And, um, and we know that that can play out in, um, in, in pathways of maltreatment for kids and families. Now, often kids are seen at school or in daycare or in sporting events or places where families can get some help or kids have an access to a safe place to be able to talk about these things and that doesn't exist right now that safety net is not there.

Traci LaLiberte (15:47):

And as we're talking about and thinking about perhaps not returning to school, um, some States have already said they're not returning to school this year. We're still waiting to hear about that in

Minnesota. That means that nobody really outside of a family home necessarily has eyes on any kids from March until September. And that is a tremendously long time for kids to be living and families, frankly, to be living in unsupported situations. So domestic violence concerns me greatly. I think we have to be prepared for the impact that this is going to have in terms of people's chemical health and chemical usage. I think that there's a lot on social media that people are teasing and joking a lot about how it is that they're using substances to kind of get through homeschooling and through the day and how that's connected to their parenting. And, and I, and you know, I, I get it some, some of that is just we're just relieving stress and having some humor, but there's some real underlying concern there in terms of, you know, how this can play out in terms of people's ongoing health and ability to manage, um, their chemical use.

Traci LaLiberte (16:58):

Um, and I think that mental health, the availability of services, while I think a lot of providers are getting up and running for telehealth as much as they can and doing mental health services, you know, if you're a single parent, I'm a single parent, you know, I don't have a lot of private time where my kids can't hear what I'm talking about. If I'm having a set, you know, if I were to be having a session through telehealth, can I really do that and have privacy or do I just skip it? And if I skip it, then what are those impacts? So these things just kind of have implications that extend beyond the immediate action. Um, and I think that we, we have to be really ready for that. We have to be planning for that and we have to be thinking about what's on the other side of this. Even if there are several waves of this, um, you know, how do we support families in homelessness? How do we support families in economic crisis and stress? How are we going to support families with increased chemical health and um, usage. Um, all of those things are going to be incredibly important for us to attend to in the months to come.

Korina Barry (18:06):

For sure. And I know we will talk to some folks at the state to hear a little bit more of, you know, what they know at this point. Again, with everything changing and needing to be able to plan a little bit into the future. And even as a center, we will be doing our best to share resources and kind of, um, help compile and summarize and get information back out to folks. And, and just hopefully we continue, we see more of what we've already been seeing of communities kind of rallying, kind of grassroots style to support each other through all of this and all of these ways, whether it's childcare, whether it's education, whether it's, you know, um, other wellbeing and wellness activities and ways of taking care of each other during this time. With all of the unexpected changes taking place right now, how is the planning and implementation of the Child Welfare Training Academy being impacted?

Traci LaLiberte (19:03):

Well, I think that the, the planning and implementation is certainly being impacted like all other aspects of child a child welfare right now. Um, there's a couple of things that come to mind. New worker training has been put on hold because again, we don't want to gather groups of 30 people together to do training. Um, we recognize that statutorily new workers have to make it through new worker training in a certain period of time. And so that's being addressed from a policy standpoint. But from a practice standpoint as well, the existing child welfare training system has been, um, working to put in person face to face training components of new worker training, um, the foundation training online and they're piloting that as we speak. And so I think that in the very near future you're going to see, um, cohorts, you know, trying to be able to move through the new worker training, um, fully online, um, or as much online as can be delivered that way.

Traci LaLiberte (20:07):

So that's, that's the first, um, first course of action by the training Academy. The Academy is continuing to try to address immediate needs, you know, worker safety and wellbeing in social distancing. How do you do an investigation and maintain social distancing, you know, how, you know, how would you do that? How do you do a home visit and maintain social distancing? And they're trying to develop the training, um, tools to get out to counties and workers as quickly as they can to address some of those questions and to be able to provide some consistency in, um, in messaging around, you know, what does a television look like and what are the standard things that you should take place during a home visit that's conducted remotely, those kinds of things. So that's ongoing and people are working very hard to get that turned around knowing that, um, you know, when the state puts something out that that is, um, that that's very directive to counties and tribes and that that has to be vetted in, uh, in a number of ways.

Traci LaLiberte (21:12):

And so people are diligently doing that work. The, uh, building of the training Academy, which was, I'm scheduled to start the summer, is going to be delayed, of course, like you would anticipate, um, many other things that said much, um, continues to, to move forward. And so I do think that the workforce of Minnesota is going to still have a new place to, um, receive training and a place where they're going to be able to get their needs met in a, in a unique way, in a way that they haven't in the past. And that's going to be a big support as we continue to see what unfolds, um, down the road and the outcomes, um, the lasting outcomes of, of what's happening in COVID-19. So my sense is that by late summer, early fall with just a slight delay that training Academy, um, facility will also be done and ready for the workforce. Okay.

Korina Barry (22:10):

Could you also, uh, could you say a little bit about the child welfare collaborative and how maybe the collaborative may opportunities for the collaborative to kind of partner together over the coming months and in a number of ways, maybe, you know, bridging, uh, training gaps or other ways of supporting the workforce?

Traci LaLiberte (22:32):

Sure. The Minnesota, uh, child welfare workforce collaborative is a relatively new, uh, group entity that, um, came together when folks who deliver training to the child welfare workforce across the state of Minnesota got together and started to think about how we could, uh, how our trainings could be complimentary to each other and how we could reduce some overlap or redundancy. And, uh, one of the ways that we looked at that was as though if I'm a, if I'm a child welfare worker and I want to seek out some training right now, I have, you know, I could go to cashew, I could go to university of Minnesota Duluth or Mitchell Hamlin or there's a variety of places, but I have to go find all that stuff. And sometimes I might sign up for a training and then two weeks later somebody advertises a training that's at the same time.

Traci LaLiberte (23:25):

And gosh, I wish I had done that one instead. So all of these providers of training have gotten together and we've decided to share a calendar, a public calendar where we will all be posting our upcoming trainings. Um, I think that in this particular time, um, of social distancing and uh, and remote learning and training, this is particularly important where people will be able to see what the variety is and we

can quickly get things up and moving and webinars and podcasts, um, and, and different, um, using different modalities of training in a new way and reaching the broadest group of people that we can. So I encourage people to go to the website, which is mnchildwelfare.com and take a look at the calendar because you're going to start to really see it, um, more fully populated from a variety of, of the training entities across the state trying to meet your needs

Korina Barry (24:27):

and we'll make sure to link to the collaborative and provide that info in the podcast details as well so folks can plug in and subscribe and stay tuned for updates in addition to what you've shared previously. I'm thinking of some of the short term long-term impacts on the system and even thinking bigger picture even more long-term, uh, knowing how the market is going to be impacted. Um, the skyrocketing unemployment rates that are growing every day and just all of the ways that our communities are being impacted. What do you think that long-term impact could look like for child welfare?

Traci LaLiberte (25:08):

Well, I think that remains to be seen largely, but some of the answer is in the question that you asked and that I think we know that we are going to have to prepare for, uh, economic challenges that lie ahead, um, that you know, small businesses and um, and, and folks whose employment dependent on the service industry life was going to look very different, even come this summer, um, and could take, um, an impact for, for a long time to come. And when we think about that, as I had said before, we think about the impact on kids and families and the increased risk that that entails. That typically translates into, um, higher activity within child welfare, which then increases the stress on the workforce itself, on the systems that are trying to provide the services. Um, you know, if our communities don't have a great tax base, child protection in the state of Minnesota is largely funded through local community property tax dollars.

Traci LaLiberte (26:14):

Uh, you're going to see stress on the system in terms of what kinds of services that are going to be able to afford and make available to families. I mean, it, there's many things that we just have to continue to watch and see what's going to happen, but I think that the impact of this, um, it can be quite long-term, um, in child welfare, uh, in terms of, um, you know, increased need for services, increased need for investigations, increased need for possibly out of home placements while families can, uh, you know, reorganize themselves. Um, and of course only doing that in the highest risk situations when kids can't be safe at their houses. But I think that there is a possibility that we're going to see more of that, um, for the reasons that we've already talked about. And that the system may or may not depend on where you are in the country, may or may not be prepared for that in terms of being able to access relative resources, are the relatives in the same position as family and unable to, um, help out in the ways that we've grown to expect in the past.

Traci LaLiberte (27:22):

Um, do we have enough homes? Are our foster homes or other kinds of caregivers going to be available, um, to be able to support kids and families, um, as they too are trying to dig out and find a new normal. So I, I think that the long-term impact on the workforce itself is increased work, increased work load, increased stress. Um, we may end up having to, to consider, you know, what are we doing in terms of hiring and training and, um, and thinking again in terms of, you know, what does that look like geographically in different places across the state because it's not going to be a one size fits all.

Korina Barry ([28:02](#)):

And so I know, and we've, we've seen over the last few weeks, I believe we're on week four of our, uh, isolation. And, and social distancing and in Minnesota, which has meant we are working remotely at our center. But I'm wondering what is giving you, what gives you hope and what keeps you going?

Traci LaLiberte ([28:25](#)):

When I think about hope and what gives me hope in these times, I think it is, I think it is the response of the community. I think it is being able to um, hear from other people how it is that they're managing, how much people are willing to share in terms of strategies and tricks for managing the balance between work and home. Um, trying the whole new thing of homeschooling for those of us who have kids that are still in school, uh, those things give me hope. I think, you know, I, I do a lot of social media and so, you know, seeing people making masks at home that they're bringing in, um, and contributing to, um, folks who are working in high risk situations. I think one of the other things is that as we look forward, I think that there are leaders in our communities that are giving us guidance.

Traci LaLiberte ([29:19](#)):

And when I talk about that, I'm talking specifically about Minnesota. I think that our governor has been transparent. He's been very clear. Um, even when the policy has shifted directions in a way that people didn't expect or the timing wasn't the same, uh, he takes the time to explain it to people. Um, he's explaining it to people in a variety of ways. So somebody whose learning style is visual. If it's auditory, if it's in print, people can access that information in our state in a variety of ways. And I believe that people are also trying really hard to make themselves available, whether it's the teachers in schools, the school bus drivers that are delivering food to, to kids who have food insecurities, um, our government agencies, people then the service industry and grocery stores. You know, people are really going the extra mile to be available to people who are at risk and people who need something. And that gives me hope regardless of how long this lasts, that we have that as a base in our community.

Korina Barry ([30:20](#)):

Well, thank you so much, Tracy, for taking time away from what I know is a very busy schedule and having your kiddos at home and just lots of things happening in life. Um, to chat with me a little bit about kind of your perspective and what you're seeing and how COVID-19 is impacting the child welfare workforce. Thanks for having me.

Korina Barry ([30:45](#)):

this podcast was brought to you by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. This podcast was produced by Korina Barry. Our series editors were Denise Cooper and Cliff Dahlberg. Music was composed by Big Cats and this podcast is supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, children and family services division. For more information, please visit the cashew website at cascw.umn.edu thank you for listening and stay well everyone.