

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
Advances in Supporting Kinship Caregivers - Part 4 (Clark County, NV) TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Ali Caliendo, Foster Kinship; Nani Leffall, Foster Kinship; Jennifer Erbes, Clark County Department of Licensing

[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 [00:00:33]: Welcome back to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates and so happy to have you back with us. We are continuing our series on advances in supporting kinship caregivers, sharing what new programs or approaches some agencies are implementing to strengthen kinship families by either offering additional services, developing stronger relationships between kinship families and child welfare partners and case workers, or changing some processes and perspectives. You know, stories stick with us. They move our emotions. Some even move us to act. Well, this episode, we'll start with a story told to us by one of our guests, Ali Caliendo. Now, from her initial connection with child welfare, she's worked to improve the experiences and capabilities of kinship families. Now, mind you, Ali did not grow up with a formal connection to child welfare. Prior to working in the field, she spent a series of years working in Silicon Valley. Now, Ali Caliendo and the others in this story are in Las Vegas, Nevada. And that's where the advances in supporting kinship caregivers that we're going to talk about are happening.

[00:01:43]: Ali Caliendo - or should I say Dr. Caliendo, as her credentials include a Ph.D. in public affairs and a master's in organizational systems renewal - is the Founder and Executive Director of Foster Kinship. Since 2011, this non-profit has worked to strengthen kinship caregiver's capacity to provide safe, permanent, and nurturing homes for children. They provide two free programs that in many cases aren't provided by a single organization - kinship navigator services and child welfare training to support foster care licensing. And this year they've launched a program to support professionals in working with kinship families.

[00:02:22]: We'll discuss how all of this came to be. Bridging the gaps for foster kinship families and what that can mean in terms of the difference between keeping families together or not. We'll also talk about the benefits of having fewer but stronger points of contact for kinship families and funding streams. And we'll also talk about advocating for changes within state policies and laws and the partnerships formed with the state of Nevada. Now along with Ali, we chatted with Nani Leffall, who's been part of the Foster Kinship team since 2015, and she manages Foster Kinship Kinship Navigator Program. We're also joined by Jennifer Erbes, Family Services Manager with the Clark County Department of Family Services. Like the other episodes in this series, you'll hear about how a change in mindset drives the changes in programs and policies. I want you to pay attention to how hospitality plays a role in the relationship with families. Okay, let's get to it. The work to improve the services, supports, and relationships to strengthen kinship families in Nevada. And it's right here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

[00:03:31]: Ali, Jennifer, and Nani, welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. And, Ali, let me start with you. Just for the audience to understand where you're coming from, would you

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mind sharing your background and your history really over the past 15 years and then kind of, the gap you recognized in how kinship families were being supported?

ALI CALIENDO [00:03:57]: Yes, absolutely, and thanks for having us. So, I started Foster Kinship almost as an accident. I think of myself as an accidental witness. So, I came to this work wanting really to help children do better. Children who've experienced abuse and neglect have improved outcomes. And so, about 12 years ago, I had just completed a master's focusing on family systems issues and I was working with children in the foster care system. And these children just ended up to be in kinship foster care, which I was not at the time familiar with the difference between kinship and traditional foster care. But I was really in homes to work with kids, so I wasn't really paying much attention to that. And what changed my entire life is working with a set of children, it was a sibling set of four who had experienced some of the most horrific trauma that I at the time had been aware of. They had seen their mother shot in the face and murdered in front of them in the space of a one-bedroom apartment. And their dad was incarcerated and the children ended up having to live in our group shelter called Child Haven Here. And it was a great aunt that stepped forward and said that she could take all four kids into her home.

[00:05:16]: And so, I was working with the children, but I was in the home of this great aunt. And I was first struck by number one, these kids have experienced just the worst thing that I could think of. And this aunt kept them together with the siblings together, so they were not separated from each other. She was keeping them in their same school. She was keeping them in their same neighborhood with the family that was still safe and secure for them to see. Same church, everything. So, I was, I was witnessing the strength of kinship care right away. I saw it right away. But over time, the aunt had just quite a few questions and concerns, not only about how do I deal with the trauma that these children have experienced, but more pressing, how am I going to feed these kids? I am going to lose my job because I've had to take all my FMLA and I'm out getting these children to appointments. And so, just watching this occur as she became more and more unable to care for them. She asked her caseworker at the child welfare agency for some assistance.

[00:06:15]: And it was about six months into this, this whole journey where the caseworker told her for the first time that she could become licensed as a foster parent. And so, I'm kind of shocked at the six month point because we've been walking alongside each other for six months. Like, why is it now six months into it that you're telling her this? So, that was part one is like where's the information for families? And then she went through the whole process to become licensed and it took several months. And it's a, it's a whole process that I know we're going to talk about today. But when they came out to do the home study and they measured her bedrooms, they told her that she didn't have enough square footage in her bedrooms to be able to become licensed as a foster parent and they were not able to license her.

[00:07:00]: So, this woman, I've seen her now for about eight, nine months, just do the impossible for these kids who deserve it. And she asked her caseworker again, listen, I found a house in our neighborhood. It's slightly larger. I can move. I can get licensed, I can meet the requirements. I can get support. You know, I can do this. And the worker said to her, wow, sounds like you can't do this financially because she was asking for \$800. She asked for \$800 to move. And he said, you can't do this financially, so we're going to go ahead and take these children and put them in traditional foster care. And so, that was the moment, that was the moment for me that changed everything because I said, no, you're not going to take these kids over \$800. And so, I sort of just changed, changed the direction and said if I care about children, I care about where they're living. They're living with family. This family deserves to be supported. And I'm not going to see four kids who've experienced the worst trauma ever

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separated from each other and their family over \$800. That was just ridiculous. So, I raised the money. We got them moved, we got them licensed, and she did end up adopting with subsidies. So, it's a fabulous outcome - and this was 10 years ago.

[00:08:13]: But at that same time I thought, I wonder if this is happening to any other families. And I started doing some research - and this was now about, beginning of 2011 - I did research and was blown away by the number of children in kinship care and I couldn't look away. And so, that's how foster kinship best started, was kind of witnessing a family's struggle and wanting to fill the gaps so that it didn't happen to as many families. And I never want to see kids separated from family and themselves over \$800. That, that was, that's never going to leave me.

TOM OATES [00:08:46]: Well, with that, what I find, it's not only the action for this specific family and recognizing that, that there is this, there's this gap. But now clearly working toward, kind of closing that gap, whatever that gap is for somebody. And so, to give folks a little bit more background on Foster Kinship, what's unique, at least initially when we were talking, is that you're able to combine not only the kinship navigator services to help people connect to the supports that they need, but also in the same group, same company, the same organization, you're also handling the licensing for foster families. And so, this may be different than what a lot of jurisdictions are used to, because there's, there's a navigator or sometimes it's a peer mentoring side and then there's the foster care licensing. But you've been able to combine them both. Can you explain how you're able to combine both of these services that for some of us may look at and seem a bit separated?

ALI CALIENDO [00:09:54]: Yes. And for context, so Foster Kinship Now is a non-profit organization that provides navigator services across the State of Nevada. And our navigator model is information and referral for kinship families, support services, and case management. So, it's in this case management piece that we find a lot of our success and we have built partnership with our child welfare agencies over the years to take on some of the extra pieces of the licensing component that are arduous for anyone and really require a whole lot of investment. And so, for many years we've been doing the pre-licensing training for families. So, we've had that connection with our licensing department. What's new now after about 10 years of operating with purely navigator and the training services, is the program that we've implemented in December, includes some in-home case management that works very closely with the licensing team to collect all of the necessary materials for families to get licensed.

[00:10:58]: So, it's actually built up over time. Whereas for many years we did what we called information sessions for new families. We were just explaining, like as if I was talking to that great aunt as she first got those four kids - okay, here's what's happening to you. Here's the journey through child welfare. Here's what it means to be licensed. Here's what child only TANF is, which is a form of financial support that families can get through welfare, and then helping families along that journey. Now we're just really taking that model and we're in every single home of kinship families who are placed in, who have children in foster care in Clark County. So, that's the evolution. It does, didn't happen overnight.

TOM OATES [00:11:37]: Well, as we continue to talk, we'll connect with what is that relationship like the state in terms of licensing family and also the relationships that developed with the families themselves as Jennifer and Nani will join us. But there's some that I want folks to take away because when we first talked, and I lost count, how many times you use the term hospitality. And so, this gets into the approach that you have with the relationship, but also recognizing, kind of meeting the need. What does hospitality - within your model - what does that look like? What does it act like?

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ALI CALIENDO [00:12:20]: We use the word hospitality a lot. We also use the word emotional support a lot. And we find that the hardest thing for kinship families at the beginning is number one, they're in crisis. Number two, things are happening to them and they just aren't able to kind of figure out what's going on. Now if you're then on top of that told go to welfare or go do this training or go to this government agency, it can feel very challenging. It's, it's not a warm and welcoming environment to walk into a welfare office after you've already said yes to taking on your grandkids. There was a lot of shame involved, there was a lot of embarrassment asking for help.

[00:13:03]: And so, our model is on purpose, really, really warm and welcoming. We try to spend a lot of time when we first meet a family, just listening - and Nani will talk about it, she's the absolute best at this - and just hearing them, giving them space to tell their story. We have the time to sit and listen. We want them to come into our office and we make them a cup of tea or coffee and we sit in a room that is not look, doesn't look like a welfare office because we want them to build trust with us and learn that we can help them. We're not just here to approve or deny something. We're here to listen and support whatever that looks like. And so, it is critical - without that component, you don't build trust with families and they won't reach out to you when they need help. So, that has been the one thing, the transformational piece of our model that we can never lose or we will not be effective.

TOM OATES [00:13:55]: There's a, there's a partnership aspect of, you know, you're not working with a client or somebody who is a case, but they're a partner and building that partnership, that they've got to trust in you and that you're working with them. But I get a sense it can't be done alone. So, just kind of falling off that, you know, cascading partnership - I'm curious to who your partners are both in the public sector and the private, the nonprofit sector to help you put all this together.

ALI CALIENDO [00:14:29]: The most critical partners are the ones that interface the most with the families for getting their needs met and making decisions about the children or home. So, our critical partners or our child welfare agencies and our welfare, division of welfare. And then of course, the school districts, legal aid, and all community resources for families, including churches and individuals. It is top to bottom, it has to be anywhere the kinship family might find themselves, we need to have that partnership there so we can more effectively and faster serve families without confusion.

TOM OATES [00:15:02]: Are there are any differences that you've got to manage when working through, because you had mentioned at first and going back to that original story with that, with that aunt that she was a kinship family, but not necessarily a, may have not been formally recognized or was she recognized, and different states have different versions of formal and informal kinship family. So, I'm curious of the differences that you've got to navigate when you're working with what could be a formal kinship family or an informal kinship family, you know, those that may be outside the child welfare system.

ALI CALIENDO [00:15:37]: Yeah, I think the word outside is perfect. So, outside and inside. So, the aunt that I was referencing, she was inside the child welfare system because the children were in foster care. However, she wasn't licensed as a foster parent, so she was not receiving any financial support, she didn't receive any training. She was just sort of on her own doing it, but the children were in foster care with all of those regulations. We serve everyone, we serve families inside and outside the child welfare system. And as many know, there are nine times as many children outside the system as there are inside the system. So, our model looks the same, whether the family is inside or outside the system, but the services that we can offer to the family look different because the foster care system is very different than, than people who are operating outside the system.

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TOM OATES [00:16:27]: Thank you. I appreciate that because that can be a challenge or a difference from different jurisdictions. So, I'd like for folks to have an understanding of the context that you're operating in. And I do want to get into your relationships with the state and those partners and also the actual service that really is provided to the families. But finally, especially for those jurisdictions that are out there that start or those community partners or other organizations that listen in, they say, that sounds like a great idea or I've been trying to do something like that similar. But how do I fund it? So, I'm curious to what you may be doing or taking advantage of to ensure that all of this, kind of, that all of this can get funded.

ALI CALIENDO [00:17:10]: Yeah. It doesn't happen overnight. Som I did start this organization as a 501c3 myself with some seed funding from someone who had passed away that was quite close to me. And it has been a slow process of building awareness first. And we operate from the needs of the family, so we hear what the family's needs are, and then we go out and try to meet those needs and fill the gap. So, our program has evolved by listening to the family and then I just go out wherever I can find it, whether it be a foundation, individuals. Or, oh, this is a, this is a gap in government services, so I need to figure out how to best partner with these government agencies to fill the gap. Just depending on what the need is, we're just always out there speaking on behalf of the families that we serve and raising the money that way. It's been really challenging. It's been a decade of doing this and I don't think we're anywhere close to sustainable as far as what needs to happen for families in our state to serve all 30,000 children in kinship care. But we're getting closer.

[00:18:14]: And one of the steps that we did take was that we have had our model externally evaluated by the state and it has been submitted to the Federal Clearinghouse for the Family First Evidence-based designation. And if we can get that reviewed and we are able to sort of have an evidence-based designation, there's other ways of funding some of our work with our foster care partners.

TOM OATES [00:18:36]: Thank you. And for those listening, if you go to this episode's webpage we'll have a link up to the clearinghouse, which is getting updated constantly with new programs that they're looking at and evaluating. And, Ali, on your behalf, fingers crossed that the evaluation happens soon, but we'll make sure that folks can also access the clearinghouse itself. Now, Jennifer and Nani have been really, really patient and, Nani, I kind of want to start with you because the relationships that you've built, we talked about that partnership that's being built with families. But didn't want to skip over the idea of combining navigator services with the licensing process, in that there are fewer points of contact that a family needs to endure. So, Nani, talk to me about the value on the family side, right, of reducing all those points of contact that they, that they would normally have to go through, to go through all of these processes.

NANI LEFFALL [00:19:40]: It's helpful to really just kind of sit and say, hey how are you doing and what are your greatest struggles? And really, I try to really help to organize their thoughts and say, what are your immediate needs? And oftentimes it's financial. Oftentimes it's I need diapers, I need wipes. It's so basic, which we are able to give because of our warehouse. I need clothing. So, as long as it's important for us to stabilize them on that emergency part, because then all of those little things, then we talked about the bigger things. Okay, financial. Let's help you with welfare, right, then we dive into, they, for them, a lot of it is, you know, this could be their child, their adult child, right? I never saw this coming or it's such a hard thing for them to deal with.

[00:20:38]: So, we get, then I start diving into oh, you know, how were they as a child? I kind of dive deeper and really meeting them where they're at to then start to open up. This has always been in their

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system and they just really never realized that. So, it does take a lot of breaking that wall down that they have because we're, we're not welfare, we're not the agency, we really want to, I really want to sit and listen and break that wall down for them, for them to open up to us.

TOM OATES [00:21:06]: I mean, this is an emotional exercise for everybody involved and there's more of that trust. And frankly, if they develop a relationship with an individual - be it you, be it somebody else - you start to break down those barriers in communication and in trust. And then does that make, then, the licensing process a little bit easier or at least something to where there's some shared knowledge to where maybe I'm not getting asked the same question by multiple people.

NANI LEFFALL [00:21:36]: Yeah, it is. We also have people on my team that have been through the licensing process because they were foster families, a foster parent, right? So, we have shared experiences, which is very important to build that connection and that trust. And so, it is very important to just have them, you know, I tell them let's work on two things every day - because there are a lot of requirements, right. And they also have appointments to take the kids, and they also have school and all of these things. But I just say, you know what, we're going to break these pieces down. I'm going to send you an email. Do you need me to text you? Like how can I meet you where you're at, what's your best way to communicate. So, breaking the big list down to little lists.

TOM OATES [00:22:21]: But does this also help the streamlining, streamlining of the licensing process? Because at the same time you can be sitting there with somebody and talking about the gaps that they need to bridge or just how they're handling the change. But then at the same time, you can take the conversation and maybe knock out something in the licensing process or just to get something out of the way. Does, I mean, it's almost just kind of taking the advantage of using the relationship that's hopefully building some trust, using it to all its advantage. Does it help streamline the process, though?

NANI LEFFALL [00:22:57]: It is helpful because it is taking that big process and breaking it down. And sometimes even saying okay, well, if you don't have your social security card, let's look and see where we have to do that. Let me help you apply for that, or let's, you know. So, it really is very helpful to kind of, because we've built that trust with them, they are now open to kinda say, this is what I don't have, this is what I have - how do I navigate to get that? Because oftentimes they don't have a lot of the documents. And so, we're just able to really walk with them to this process.

ALI CALIENDO [00:23:33]: And I might add, too - this is Ali - that there's a huge benefit to just sitting and spending that first hour listening to their story. Because I don't have to go through a formal intake process when I'm hearing someone's story, I know the information that they need for a welfare application or for a licensing application. I'm taking notes the whole time they're explaining their story. So, it's not like tell me all of this demographic information and then put your history of trauma in order. I'm able to gather, and the team is able to gather so much from listening that we don't even have to have it feel like a formal process. We're getting the information that they're disclosing. It's just coming out their way. And then there's not that many holes on some of these applications to fill in after those conversations.

TOM OATES [00:24:19]: No, thank you for adding that. You just, you know, you're able to create a full picture for somebody and then deliver on all of the things that they may need. Which then leads us to the licensing itself and the fact that, you know, Ali, you have a contract with the state, with Jennifer. And, Jennifer while the relationship, that contract is based on licensing families, I'm curious to what you may be learning or what the, what you may be learning out of Ali's group and what they're providing

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that may extend about kind of a full picture of these kinship families beyond just the licensing experience. I'm curious to what this relationship and what this work is providing you and the Department of Family Licensing.

JENNIFER ERBES [00:25:12]: So, I will say I've greatly enjoyed my partnership with Ali over the years, it's grown. We learn from each other and I think that's why we evolve as we go, right? As we learn new things and what our families need, we have to figure out, then, how can we best serve our families? Our goal at Family Services is to keep kids with family, reunify with biological families when necessary and keeping them with family is the best thing for kids in the long run. So, how do we maintain kids and keep them stable? And when you put kids with families, as Ali had said and Nani has talked about, that puts that family member who stepped forward, I want to help in an, in an immediate crisis themselves, right. They're your family, you want to help. But then you realize taking on three kids is a lot, even though they're your, your family there, your, your blood or your best friend's kids, whatever that situation.

[00:26:17]: Because they're that informal support, they don't necessarily have all of those other things that were built in. Feeding three kids is expensive. They don't necessarily come with clothes when they get pulled from their homes. And even though you may have a relationship with that family member, you may not be able to get their things at that time. So, now you have these kids who don't have their clothes, don't have their toys, it might put a strain on your relationship now with that family member. So, what can we do to recognize the supports that are needed? So, working with Ali - and yes, they had that initial training piece of it - but how do we reach those families sooner? How do we make sure we support them sooner? So, by the time we get to them, it isn't, I can't, I can't do this anymore. And then we lose that resource for our kids and we don't want to do that.

[00:27:12]: So, learning how to stabilize our families, how to keep kids safe and stable until we can make those resources - because nothing happens fast in child welfare and bureaucratic processes, right, which we understand. So, how can we get to these families sooner? Get them some resources faster so that when they're going through this licensing process - which is a process, we have to follow certain regulations, we have statutes we have to follow and there's no, you can't distinguish, right, between a stranger foster care and a kinship foster home. There's, they're the same and statute in black and white words. So, helping them navigate through some of those difficulties has been helpful to have somebody who they trust and willing to listen. So, by the time they get over to our licensing workers, it's not quite as stressful and they're not quite as burnout by the time we get to them hopefully, and can keep those kids and then provide them with the support they need moving forward.

TOM OATES [00:28:15]: Well, you touched base a little bit on it about trying to reach earlier, right, trying to work upstream, which, Ali, connects right back to you talking about a family first, let's get this cleared. Because this overall, when we start talking about, well, foster care may not be immediately thought of as a prevention model, but family strengthening and family stability is. Jennifer, have you noticed any, I'm curious, have you noticed any differences either in timelines or in terms of retention? Has there been a difference that you can point to as saying, yeah, we see the effectiveness of this work and this is looking different either in either data or in anecdotal stories.

JENNIFER ERBES [00:29:03]: So, I know we're working on that, right, it's fairly new. So, we started in December and new processes aren't always easy. We hit, we have our little bumps in the road while we're all learning our new roles and responsibilities. I'm hoping that's what we're going to see, and Ali may have maybe some more information than I do in some of that. But what we're hoping to see is licensing sooner so that our families are getting licensed quicker. Disruptions with fictive and kinship

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families decrease significantly so we can keep kids with families. I know those are our big strides. On our side, obviously, I want to make sure that we can get families license sooner, so they're not waiting a year and then going, what, I needed all of this and it's a year later. Like in Ali's initial story, like somebody shouldn't wait nine months and find out what I could have been, there is another process I could've been doing. So, our team and Ali's team, we work really hard at trying to get that information to families as soon as possible so we can start that, that support sooner. So, maybe Ali might have a little bit more detail on some of those, those numbers.

ALI CALIENDO [00:30:15]: I have, I do have a little bit of information - and of course, the licensing process being as long as it takes and we just started, we won't we won't know for a little while objectively, if we can do it faster. But what I can tell you is the foster kinship data and we, compared to the same time period as of last year as to the time period of this program, we're serving about 40 more, 40% more families that are formal in our navigator program with those families stabilization services. And what I think is really interesting is before, we served about 38% of formal families with welfare applications, getting them support in that way. And it took us about 73 days to get them that help. With this new program, we're hitting 74% of formal families and that's a huge increase - almost doubled - and it's only taking 18 days. So, when we talk about stabilizing the family, yeah, the licensing process is what it is, but the fact that we can get this financial support to supplement while we're talking about all these other things so much faster, I think we're going to see that that might make a difference.

[00:31:26]: We're also seeing that the amount of time it takes for a family to get from, like, the initial conversation to finishing their class series - which we have data on over many years - it used to take about 131 days and now it's taking about 86 days. So, we're shortening some of those time-frames on the front end for licensing. And I'm hoping these are leading indicators that show we might be able to shorten the licensing timeframe for families who are willing. I'm almost positive we're going to see more families get licensed than before. It's just the jury's out on if they can do it faster or not. But they're going to have more support while they're going through it.

TOM OATES [00:32:03]: Thank you for sharing that and that's really intriguing, especially just - and time matters, right? Time matters and be it just getting services to somebody or sometimes it's the service themselves, it's at \$800 right now, could make a huge difference in somebody's really long-term future. Now, you've talked about kind of changing how folks are going to interact, systems are connecting services. But I want folks to understand that there's maybe some other ways that they can help impact their community and that maybe taking a trip up to their state capitals. Ali, I know you've spent some energy aimed at Carson City to kind of change the laws within the state and policies related to child welfare. So, first off, I want folks to get an understanding of what you were able to, what you identified and then what you targeted, and maybe what you did to help spark a little change.

ALI CALIENDO [00:33:01]: Sure. So one of the things that we've noticed for years, are families who are in that licensing process or have the ability to get licensed, they end up disrupting rather quickly - disrupting meaning they no longer can care for the child. The child has to go somewhere else. And for those families that disrupt in those first 60, 70 days, we identified that a lot of it was a lack of financial resources, a lack of financial support. And so, a big piece of that is why we focus so heavily on getting families connected to the welfare benefits they're entitled to. And what we noticed was this child only TANF benefit was available to relatives who are caring for children in foster care, but it wasn't available to fictive kin or those family friends that were caring for children in foster care. But the child welfare agency considered both relatives and fictive kin kinship. So, the placement sort of standards were the same.

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[00:33:55]: So we had two different agencies that were defining kinship slightly differently. And it was really hurting our fictive kin families because they couldn't get access to financial support until they finished licensing, which takes time. So, that's what we identified as an issue and we went and advocated for what our state now calls fictive kin TANF. And it allows fictive kin caregivers to access the same TANF benefits that relatives can, provided the child welfare agency is considering them a kinship family. And so, that has been a huge - we've done so many of those, now - it's a huge benefit to those families because again, as Jennifer said, licensing takes time and I didn't want to see families not able to do it over financial reasons when there was other support we could get in the interim.

TOM OATES [00:34:40]: So, I'm curious, was this just knocking on doors, was this making phone calls? Was this, bureaucracy at its best can, heading up to anyone's state, state capitol. So, how did you turn the idea into action?

ALI CALIENDO [00:34:58]: A lot of time. I think I kind of identified it in maybe 2015, I wrote a whole bunch of white papers and policy briefs and educated a bunch of leaders. It failed the first time in 2017, it didn't go through. Our state only meets every two years, so we tried again in 2019. So, it was a many, multi-year process. And that is just the pace that you have to advocate at. It's not going to solve the person in front of you who's crying. But I can take that person's story and I can add it to all the other stories and I can start working on the long, slow policy changes that are needed.

TOM OATES [00:35:36]: Well, congratulations. And also, just kudos for the work and the diligence on that. And so, just to expand the work that's being done, you guys are now also working across the professional lines, in terms of the line level workers really across the state. You established - if, I want to get the name right - the Kinship Training Institute. And this was for, for workers really working across different systems, multi-disciplinary systems. First off, what are you trying to help provide all of these attendees? Because clearly, there's a need, more education and more awareness when folks are working across systems. But I'm curious to why you've established this and what you're trying to provide.

ALI CALIENDO [00:36:32]: So, kinship care - the space that we work in - is really complicated. And I don't think I realized how complicated it was until I've spent this, over this decade studying it. What we find to be one of the biggest sources of pain that caregivers share with us is they're getting wrong information from the workers that they're interfacing with. So, for example, we've had caregivers who were told that we're going to put this child in your home, but you automatically get SNAP benefits - or food stamps - you can automatically get the support from licensing, right? So, they're told this. And then they come and they try to get welfare benefits and they're denied and they try to get licensed and they realize it's this huge burden and they give up. And they say, I don't want to do this anymore because what I was told isn't true. And it's very discouraging.

[00:37:23]: And so we can educate caregivers all day long. And that's a huge piece of our work. But until we can also share what we've learned with other professionals who are intersecting with them and give the professionals the tool to give the right information, I don't think we're doing enough. So, that's the goal of the Kinship Training Institute is to just share the knowledge that we've learned the hard way and make it easier so that there isn't as much misinformation. Because one thing we find is if you tell a family they can get something and they can't, it is depressing. If you never tell them about that thing that they can't get, they seem to be able to keep going with what they can do. So, we never want to share wrong information because we see that leads to disruption. And that's, that's the whole point. We want to keep kids with family. We want to reduce disruption. We want to train professionals.

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TOM OATES [00:38:12]: Nani, I'm curious from your point of view - especially in working with all of the families - what are kind of those gaps that may exist? Because those families may be working with other caseworkers, as well. And I'm assuming in your conversations with them, they're telling you about their experiences. You know, what may be some of those gaps that professionals may not realize exist when they're interacting with that family, either that one time per week or one time per month or whenever they, they're periodically meeting with them. What are some of those things that you wish the other professionals knew that maybe they just don't know walking in the door?

NANI LEFFALL [00:38:53]: I think oftentimes you see generational issues that's going on, whether it's generational poverty. I've talked to clients that have dealt with the system before in their own personal life and now they're the grandmother. I have clients that have had previous addictions with, or they've had family members that have dealt with addictions. So, there's no, there's so many pieces. It's not just that kids got removed, but there is an under, there's a story, every family has a story. And so, it's really sitting and understanding their story that goes back years. Or you have families that are well-to-do. And I've given my son, daughter the best schooling and all of that. But oftentimes it's just I need, they needed that adult child just needed the time from their parents.

[00:39:53]: So, it's really listening to the family story and really being able to help them work through those emotional feelings and issues and then helping them to connect with how do I talk to the agency? How do I word things? How do I get things done right? How do I formulate an email that I need to communicate that I need help with food items or my rent this month because I'm taking that money now and paying for, I don't know, maybe their school stuff that they need to pay for. Just these, these expenses that are not expected, right? How do I communicate with the agency what I need? Just giving them the words and just guiding them through that and helping.

TOM OATES [00:40:40]: Thank you. And so, Ali, you just wrapped up the first session of the Kinship Training Institute - curious what you've learned.

ALI CALIENDO [00:40:48]: Well, it's awesome to say we've done our first conference, we're going to do another one in September and it's going to be online only to try to reach more people. We're recording everything that we do so that anyone can go to our website and watch. There's no gatekeeping. We want everyone to have information. And what we learned - which is the same thing we learn over and over again in this work - is that everyone, every professional comes to this work with their own understanding of their job and their role that is very specific. And there is a need for all of us to sort of think systemically about how do all of our parts fit together. And not just for getting kids to be unified with their parents, which is the primary goal of the agency. But to make sure kids are okay in the moment where they are right now. And those are the, those are the conversations that Nani is talking about having the, helping the caregiver advocate to have their needs met with the agency. And we're also wanting some of these agency professionals to understand the hardship that kinship families are facing without judgment or recrimination. And so, those are the conversations that need to happen. And I'm always amazed at how open people really are to learning. It's just about education. It's not that anyone has bad intentions. It's just we don't know. And so, I think the more we can educate and work together, the better it's going to be for, for all families. And that's, that's what we have to do is just explain the process so that there's empathy all around.

TOM OATES [00:42:19]: As we were just looking at across our own Zoom as we're recording this, Jennifer's just nodding her head at everything Ali was saying. And so, Jennifer, just how this resonates with you and your teams that when, kind of these - and I don't want to call them barriers because it's

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not like people put them up, but those barriers just exist because of the nature of the work. I would just like to get your take on maybe what your teams and what those staff are kind of experiencing from that side of the equation.

JENNIFER ERBES [00:42:57]: So, I know on the licensing side we do a really, we tried to do a really good job at maintaining communication, especially with Ali's team, because we have to work extremely closely to know where families are, what's been going on, and what we need to move them through the process. I feel the greater issue tends to be with the entire agency when you have staff turnover and you have new staff coming on and trying to train them in all of these things that they need to know about child safety and ensuring kids are safe and understanding, like, in that moment when they're assessing a family all of these things they have to remember to make sure that they're making the right decisions with these families and kids. And then they put them with a family member and they're like, phew, okay, I have them someplace safe, right? And then they're like, okay, you're going to be fine. You're family. They know you. And I will go about doing the rest of my stuff and not taking that time.

[00:43:56]: And thankfully, having some of that partnership with Ali's group helps kind of get in there quicker because caseworkers are in that crisis mode sometimes with the families and trying to make those decisions and are just saying things right? Like, hopefully it won't be that long, you know, trying to say things that they think are going to help calm the family - in reality that just creates mistrust at times. Well, you only said it was going to be a couple days, it's been a month. And those, even though they didn't mean it's, you know, to cause anxiety or to create that, it does start creating a mistrust with the agency. And when we're trying to then build that back up with them, it's hard when you're another licensing worker coming in or you're just going to tell me something.

[00:44:44]: And so, trying to get back into making sure we're educating our caseworkers on what is available and what is the best thing to do to support those families. Having Ali's workshop where we could have some of our staff attend to learn what it's like to come on the other side. Having that empathy, to be able to take a minute, to listen and to understand how we impact families across the board with just one statement could really impact how we stabilize those kids and family in the long-term.

TOM OATES [00:45:17]: An excellent example in listening with the families, with your peers, but then communicating to share the full perspective so we all kind of understand, because we, we move pretty fast and you want to move fast. But at the same time, we tend to be moving really fast and can, unfortunately, maybe make somebody overlook some things. Be it an \$800 gap, or be it a way to actually just make sure the room's measured correctly and does that really matter? And putting the hospitality part first, and sometimes that also means with our coworkers and our partners. Ali Caliendo, Nani Leffall, Jennifer Erbes - thank you guys so much for, for sharing your experiences, sharing your partnerships, and what you guys are continuing to do. And good luck on the Kinship Training Institute as you guys continue to move forward in what's been, I guess maybe a 15-year journey for some, but a lifetime journey for others. And a journey that's still, still continuing. Thank you guys so much for being a part of this with us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

[00:46:35]: Now, we expect to have one more episode in this series coming your way as we wrap up exploring and learning the ways child welfare agencies and their partners are advancing how kinship families and caregivers are supported, trained, and engaged. On this episode's webpage we'll point you to where you can learn more about the work being performed by Foster Kinship. You can also find other episodes in this series. Just head on over to childwelfare.gov and search podcasts. We'll point you to

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resources and information to support your work with kinship caregivers and grand families. We'll also have a link to our list of state kinship care contacts and programs so you can find those crucial points of contact in your state or any state if you're looking to connect with resources to support families. And that's just part of Information Gateway's related organizations list. And that's a collection of contact information and websites for related national and state organizations that offer information about child welfare.

[00:47:32]: And there's also our collection of national organizations related to child welfare, such as foster care and adoption alumni groups, advocacy and public policy organizations, prevention focused organizations, fatherhood organizations - check it all out on childwelfare.gov. My thanks again to Jennifer Erbes from the Nevada Department of Family Licensing, Nani Leffall and Ali Caliendo from Foster Kinship all for their time and willingness to share what they've learned and what they're doing. And of course, my thanks to you for joining us each and every month for another episode of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates, have a great day.

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:48:15]: 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.