Kelley Traver celebrated 30 years as a foster care social worker in Fairfax County, Virginia this past February. She has dedicated her career to fighting for the success of children in the foster care system through strong advocacy for family reunification. Kelley attributes her county's success in family reunification to the cohesive teamwork of the units and programs within the Fairfax County Department of Family Services. Kelley explains that “there are children who need to be in foster care, but no child needs to grow up in foster care”, and her Department’s emphasis on preventative measures and comprehensive support services for families significantly increases the likelihood of successful reunification. According to Melody Vielbig, Kelley’s supervisor, Kelley “knits birth families, foster families, and community partners into a fluid support network” and stresses strong collaboration so that birth and foster families “work almost immediately in a co-parenting role for the children.” Kelley believes that almost every child can, and should, have a relationship with his or her parent, and she works tirelessly in maintaining and developing parent-child relationships.

By: Katie Carden, Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law, J.D. Candidate 2021
What made you interested in child welfare? What types of positions or roles have you had within the child welfare system?

When I went to college I focused on criminal justice. I was interested in going into law enforcement and participated in a nine-week internship with the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Department in 1985. While there, I quickly realized that a role in law enforcement was not for me. When I moved to West Virginia after graduating from college, I got my first job as a Juvenile Probation Officer. This experience first exposed me to the foster care system. I was hired as a Juvenile Probation Officer and at that time, this position was under DSS. My title was Social Worker but my position was as a Juvenile PO. My team would receive calls for foster care situations and therefore I became exposed to children who were very seriously abused. One incident in particular strongly called me to work with children in the foster care system. It was an Easter Weekend and I was on call after hours and a CPS call was made from a hospital. I went to the hospital and was introduced to a little girl who had been physically abused. This is when I decided to dedicate my life to helping children through helping families.

My family moved to Fairfax, VA in 1990 and I applied to be a Social Worker within the Foster Care and Adoption Unit. I began as a Social Worker I and overtime was promoted to Social Worker II and eventually, Social Worker III.

What is one thing you recommend in working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?

I think the most important tool is to bridge the gap between parents and foster parents. To focus on constant, clear communication from the very beginning. You must keep families engaged. We know that these parents love their children, we want them to have their children back, and parents are pivotal in this reunification process. I think it’s important to try to set up visitation right away and include foster parents in this process. I try to schedule regular partnership meetings with all parties involved. I like to schedule these every 30 days, everyone comes to the table – parents, foster parents, GAL, CASA, any relatives, etc. – to talk about the strengths and the weaknesses of the families and to highlight what we need to do to get the children out of foster care as soon as possible.

Describe some efforts that have been made to improve the child welfare practice in your area.

Fairfax County’s child welfare system has evolved tremendously over the years. This is evident in our numbers alone, when I first started working with Fairfax County, there were about 800 children in the foster care system. Today, there are under 200 children in the system. Fairfax County prioritizes preventative measures to avert families from entering into the child welfare system. We have established several units, programs, and teams that work to promote reunification and avoid prolonged foster care placement.

Fairfax County has evolved in how it responds to child welfare calls and referrals. Previously, any referral that came in through the CPS hotline, and the hotline staff would assess the level of the threat and how CPS should respond. Today, there is an entire team called the Red Team, who assesses the referral. The Red Team is made up of about 4-5 people, the team includes a worker from foster care, CPS, Protect and Prevent Unit, the hotline staff, and maybe another social worker. Every referral that comes in is screened through this team, and if the team cannot come up with a decision, the referral will go to the program directors to make decision. Because of this change, only the families who truly need help from CPS become involved in the system. This new policy ensures that CPS is not making unnecessary visits or intrusions for families who do not need our help.

Several programs have been established to help families in obtaining the specific support they need and services that are unique to their own demands. Families can be referred to our Family in Need of Services (FINS) program instead of CPS. This referral will just alert us that a family in the county may need additional support and services. In these cases, a social worker will meet with the family to figure out how the county can best support them and get them the services they most need to succeed.

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Instead of social workers handling much of their cases alone or independently, we have set up Case Consultation teams. Case workers meet with this team in a formal setting and the case worker will raise topics or questions that he or she might be struggling with. The case worker might seek help regarding risk assessment, family strengths and weaknesses, etc. Everything is well-documented and charted on a large white board so we can all brainstorm the best course of action.

We also recognized the significance of placing children with relatives instead of foster families. We have created a new role, the Family Search Worker. This person is in charge of finding any and all relatives of a child who enters the foster care system. The Family Search Worker compiles a list of relatives and gives it to the caseworker to review. We then send out relative notification letters alerting any relative that he or she might be related to a child who has entered into the system. Every six months, the search worker will conduct another search and update the relative list if the child has not yet been returned home or no family member has been identified. We acknowledged how one’s finances often serve as a barrier in placing kids with their relatives. A lot of families need extra money to care for their relatives. Now we have a whole new team and system, the Kinship Unit and Kingap Process, dedicated to financially assisting relatives who care for children placed in the foster care system. One of my clients, a young lady of 16, was able to be placed with her grandparents in Florida because of the financial assistance that this program provides.

We have created Nurturing Programs that are tailored to children of all different age groups (0 – 12 months, 5 – 12 years, 13 – 17 years). They are offered in both Spanish and English and the parents and children attend these classes together. The parents and children first work separately, but then they are brought together and share dinner with one another. This class provides hands-on help to parents, it is a preventative practice for parents who might be experiencing some difficulties in parenting and discipling their children.

Additionally, we have an entire unit that deals with permanency and life skills for teenagers and teenage parents. Our Department also has a Father Engagement Program which is specifically designed for father engagement. Fairfax County really tries to cover all of its basis and ensure that there is a support group for every family, parent or child.

What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?

The child welfare system has greatly improved in Fairfax, VA over the years. There is a strong emphasis on keeping parents connected to their children and ensuring that the parents and foster parents have regular interactions together. Our jurisdiction does a wonderful job with training and mentoring new social workers. We strive to provide thorough, conscientious training before any new social worker obtains a case load. We very delicately bring new social workers onto the team, working to thoroughly educate them and make sure that they have as much support as they need in our unit. Another strength is that many of the Direct Supervisors are very involved in each case. I feel like I can reach out to my supervisor at any time, and my supervisor is just as determined as I am to bridge the gap between parents and foster parents. She is always very familiar with each family’s situation and will often accompanying her workers to meetings, visits and court hearings.

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What are some of the weaknesses?

Unfortunately, there is a lot of turnover amongst social workers in the child welfare system. This is not necessarily because the social workers are not “cut out” for this work, but because foster care social workers have a history of being overworked. There is a lot of paperwork, lots of documentation that needs to be done, and one’s caseload has the potential to get a little crazy. Social workers are responsible for making sure federal guidelines and local policies are being met, ensuring that service plans get to court, and keeping track of everything to ensure we receive proper funding. Additionally, this work can be very emotionally draining on you. Despite this, there has been drastic improvement within the system. Twenty years ago, I had a caseload of 38 children. This was incredibly difficult to manage, it didn’t work because the social workers couldn't properly focus on each case. Social workers did not have the capacity to provide the attention necessary to all of the children in their caseloads. We were just putting band-aids on every situation. Now, my caseload consists of 11 children. The goal within the Fairfax County unit is to keep social workers with caseloads of 8 – 10 children.

Maintaining a reasonable caseload of 8 – 10 children is so important because it allows social workers to do their jobs effectively and to build the necessary trust and relationships with the children, their parents and their foster parents.

What programs or practices are most effective in helping parents reunify?

Fairfax County's Child Protective Services (CPS) and Protection and Preservation Services (PPS) work in tandem and do a really great job of trying to ensure that children are not separated from their families. There are several units within PPS and CPS that provide critical services that lessen the likelihood that families will be separated. The Protect and Prevent Unit focuses on providing services to families so that they can avoid child separation, they provide preventative services to families who might be at-risk. These social workers go into the community and provide family assessments. Today, there is a big focus on highlighting and recognizing the strengths of the family, whereas before assessments tended to just focus on the weaknesses. Now, we highlight positive family traits and build on familial strengths and support of the community.

Further, it is critical to have a CASA or a GAL who is very involved. In many cases, the GAL will come to the home visits with the workers but will also make his or her own independent home visits. The GAL or CASA can serve as a support for the families. It is critical to set up visitation right away. A practice that is very effective in helping us to immediately establish visitation and ensure visitation continues, is to contract with different agencies who provide supervised therapeutic visitation. We contract with licensed agencies whose sole purpose on the case is to oversee visitation. These agencies will transport children to and from visitations and will supervise the visitations. This opens up many opportunities for visitation, and these agency workers can spend hours with families. Many of these agencies will also provide home-based services when the child does transition back home. These agencies will go into the home and assist with whatever the family may need – budgeting, organization, setting up a structure or routine, etc.

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What advice would you give to any judges, agency directors, or governors about how to improve the system?

I think a critical improvement that Fairfax County has made is that we now have a policy known as “one Judge, one family.” This just means that one Judge follows the family’s involvement with the Department in its entirety. This policy is critical because the Judges become very familiar with the families and the children. In Fairfax County, the Honorable Thomas P. Sotelo, presides over many of my cases. Having Judge Sotelo involved in the case from the beginning to the end is monumental in the progression of the case – he knows the families, he is engaged with them, he knows the situation. The Judge holds everyone accountable and it puts families more at ease to continue working with the same Judge. Court is scary enough as it is, having families engaging with a different Judge for every hearing just makes the court process more intimidating. Families are nervous and terrified that they are even involved with the child welfare system, and these fears are amplified when families need to discuss their case with an unfamiliar Judge. All of the Fairfax County Juvenile Court Judges model this involvement with the family’s that are assigned to them.

What was one experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?

Ten years ago, I had a case that opened my eyes. I was working with a mother who was heroin-addicted, she had a long-standing history with child welfare. She had a five-year-old child who had already been in the system and was living with her maternal grandparents. At nine months pregnant, the mother was arrested for failing to comply with her probation rules. She gave birth to her baby in a jail cell. The baby spent six weeks in the NICU, being weaned off of heroin. The mother was unsure of who the father was but provided me with two names of potential fathers. I called one of them and he was hostile, cursing and angry that I called him about this. I called him again. He finally got an attorney and agreed to come court. A paternity test proved that he was the father. The mother was sentenced to 4 months in jail and then she was to be admitted to a two-year residential treatment program. With foster care mandated timelines, it did not appear that this mother would be able to care for her newborn baby.

The Department filed an Adoption plan with the Court and notified the parents that Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) petitions were filed. The father initially stated that he was in agreement and not in a position to care for a baby. At the Court hearing, the presiding Judge refused to allow such a drastic decision to be made at such an early time in the case. He explained that a TPR should never be filed prior to the Department diligently searching for relatives for placement. The petitions were denied, and the Judge instructed everyone to look into other paternal familial options for placement. The Judge stated the paternal side of this baby’s family needed to further be assessed. The father, realizing that there could be a lot of support to him, decided that he wanted to meet his son and be considered as an option. This father was ultimately awarded custody of his son and still texts me pictures of his son. I learned here the importance of thorough assessment and engagement of parents, to include fathers, in planning for their children.
Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so, what are they?

I think a lot of people do not trust the child welfare system. The public, overall, doesn't understand the system. I think the public doesn't understand that foster care is devastating to families and children. Children might need to be in foster care, but they do not need to grow up in foster care.

What has made you stay as a social worker in the foster care unit for over 30 years?

I have always felt supported—I know that I can reach out to my supervisor at any time, can reach out to my unit, to my coworkers. I wouldn't have stayed this long if not for this amazing support. I think it's important to remember that we're not in this alone, that the kids we work with are not our children, and they need to be with their families. That's was a lightbulb for me, when you're a new child welfare social worker, you feel like these children are all your responsibility and they're not. They have families who care for them and love them, and who will take responsibility for what's best for them. You're just there to help that process.

I could have retired two years ago and if there's ever a day I wake up and really don't want to go to work, then I'll change something. What I love about this job is that every day is different. Right before the pandemic, I was on a plane to Jacksonville, FL to visit my 16-year-old client who now lives with grandparents. Down and back in one day. I am dedicated to helping achieve permanency for these children. It's important to always stay optimistic with these families. Many kids in foster care need to be in foster care temporarily, for their immediate safety or permanency. Most parents can and want to raise their children, but they might just not be capable at that moment. Foster care is a temporary solution and reunification with family is always the first goal.