Leslie Haws and Melissa Morales are not just co-workers, they’re also best friends who are committed to bettering the lives of families involved in the child welfare system. They met as Child Welfare Emergency Response social workers for the Department of Child Welfare Services (CWS) in Yolo County, California many years ago. While working together at Yolo County Child Welfare Services on the same Emergency Response Team, Leslie and Melissa could not have been more different in how they were trained to do the job and their social work practice. Over time Leslie and Melissa began to respect one another professionally and were able to come together, learning from one another and ultimately having huge influence over one another’s CWS practice.

In 2017, they were approached by David Meyers and John Passalacqua, the managing attorneys and founders of Dependency Legal Services (DLS), a non-profit family defense law firm, to assist in their development of an interdisciplinary program of representation for families in dependency court. Leslie and Melissa jumped at the opportunity and now work with the DLS attorneys representing parents and children, supporting the families in whatever way necessary to achieve reunification.

Not only do Leslie and Melissa work directly with families, but David explains that they “serve as field instructors to social work students” who intern for a year in family defense before going to work for CWS. As intern supervisors, Leslie and Melissa are committed to making sure that these new classes of child welfare social workers are open-minded, innovative in their approaches to helping families, and committed to reunification. Leslie and Melissa’s social work practice is so successful that it has now expanded to several Northern California counties. After working in CWS for a total of 25 years, Leslie and Melissa obtained their clinical social work licenses and moved into the medical social work field. But their hearts remained in the child welfare system, and with DLS they found a way to not only continue serving families directly, but also created a program to train future child welfare social workers so that the entire child welfare system will improve, strengthen, and better serve families.

By: Katie Carden, Villanova Law Charles Widger School of Law, J.D. Candidate 2021

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What made you interested in child welfare? What roles have you had within the child welfare system?

Leslie: I kind of just landed working in the child welfare system, right out of college. I received my MSW in 2001. I went into the child welfare system blindly, not really knowing a lot about it. I first worked in Yolo County, California for nine years in Emergency Response. So, I wasn’t doing a lot of reunification in that period. I left Yolo County and worked for Nevada County as a Supervisor in Emergency Response for about three years. While working within the child welfare system, I was involved in the court process and carried a couple of cases, but reunification wasn’t part of my main job description.

When I left child welfare, I started working in a hospital and found that I was missing direct practice. I was referred to Dave Meyers and John Passalacqua of Dependency Legal Services about this position they were creating where social workers would work with dependency attorneys to provide an interdisciplinary program of representation. I found that with this position, I was able to remain working within the child welfare system, but I wasn’t confined to only doing the front-line work. I recognized that this wasn’t a position that I could take on myself because I was working a full-time job elsewhere. So, Melissa and I proposed job sharing this part-time position. And now, we’ve been with Dependency Legal Services (DLS) for almost three years.

*Fun fact about Leslie:* I like to be outside and do outdoor activities. In my mind, I think that I’m pretty adventurous. But in reality, I’m just not. I’ve gotten stuck in the middle of a massive zip line course in Hawaii. I’ve done rope swings and didn’t let go at the right time, merely killing myself. I have this adventurous spirit, but it often doesn’t bode well for me.

Melissa: Both Leslie and I have our master’s degrees in social work. I went through the Title IV-E Program, which provides stipends for MSW students who plan to specialize in child welfare. With this program, we have to work for a California county for two years after graduation to obtain this child welfare specialty. I went through this program, graduating with my masters in 2004 and then worked for Placer County for several years. I left Placer County and went to Yolo County. Overall, I have about ten (10) years of direct, front line CWS experience. Like Leslie, I also worked as an emergency response worker.

When I first started working at Yolo County CWS, I realized that the county was operating, as I understood it to be, through “the old way of doing CPS.” If we felt like kids were at any risk, they would be removed, without protective custody warrants, front end services, or law enforcement involvement. During my experience of working in CWS in Placer County, they were focused much more on working within the legal system, serving protective custody warrants when removing children and assessing other possibilities besides just removal. Placer and Yolo counties operated very differently. When I got to Yolo, they were beginning to turn the corner. At that time, the California Redesign legislation and funding was a big deal. Its goal was to transform CWS in California.

I left the child welfare system in 2012 to work in the hospital. Currently, Leslie and I both work part-time for DLS while also working full time at a local Sacramento hospital. Leslie works in the NICU

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with families whose babies are very sick. I work in the Emergency Room, as a Crisis and Psychiatric social worker at a Level One Northern California Medical Trauma Center.

*Fun fact about Melissa:* I like to hang out and spend time with my family. We have a larger family with four (4) kids and lots of extended family. I love to do yard work and more recently have taken up a hobby of growing fruit trees, though I know nothing about fruit trees or trees in general, Google is always my help. I like to sew and cook, but above all, besides spending time with the family and working a lot, I am a huge napper, I love taking naps, and oh coffee, I love coffee.

**Can you explain your role at Dependency Legal Services?**

This position at DLS blossomed into something much larger than we first anticipated. Initially, our role was to supervise MSW interns, and we still do this. We also conduct home visits, health visits for families in the system, case consultations, and we work with parents who are involved with child welfare. We work for the attorneys at DLS who provide representation in child welfare cases, representing either the parent or child. DLS attorneys will assign us cases to go out and assess kids in placement. We’re social workers but we’re actually called investigators in this role, which does not completely represent the entirety of our position and what we do working with CWS families. We work a lot with both kids and parents. Our role in reunification with DLS is to really assess the situations and determine how the families are doing, what departmental requirements are being met by the parents, and what’s not getting met by the department. Representing families in child welfare cases is really a team effort between the attorney and social worker – you need both to provide the best representation in these cases.

We advocate for kids and parents; we help ensure that their needs are met within the case to help assist them with every opportunity for reunification. Sometimes, it’s just sitting down and telling parents that if they keep going in a certain destructive direction, they’re likely not going to have their kids returned to their care. We encourage parents, but we also hold them accountable as needed. We’re their ally, but to be their ally we need to make sure they understand everything. Educating families, foster parents, and kids on the Juvenile Dependency Court process and CWS is a fairly large part of the services we offer to families. We try to support and encourage families to reunify. We explain to families what they need to do while working with CWS to make reunification happen.

We do a lot of coaching and advocating for the needs of the parents and children. Attorneys look at these cases through a different lens than social workers typically do. When we get involved, we can assess what is really going to help this family through a psychosocial lens – such as regional services, developmental services, needs for kids, mental health services and emotional and supportive services. We make those assessments and recommendations so that the DLS attorneys can take the information we provide to the court and ask for certain services or programs that will benefit these families. In the larger picture, our intervention with kids and CWS families is to give kids and parents a voice in Court.

A lot of times, we’ll get involved with cases that have been open for eight months and the families have not received any CWS services. We take that information to the attorney and the attorney takes that to the court and pushes back against CWS to make sure that families and kids are receiving or have

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received all and any services for reunification. We hold CWS accountable and request that appropriate services are provided to all kids and families. When adequate services are not provided throughout the case, then CWS families are then not given a fair opportunity to keep their children or have their children returned to them.

The position spoke to both our experiences. We realized, “wow, we can work with these families and train future child welfare social workers”, and this opportunity just turned into something so amazing. We’re both so passionate about child welfare, so when we were approached by Dave and John, it was hard for us to say no.

How did you two start working together?

When we first started working together, we actually didn’t like each other! When I (Melissa) first started working in Yolo County, I was so shocked at how Yolo operated. They operated with this old way of doing child welfare of “removing kids and asking questions later” which is one side of the CWS pendulum. Leslie was trained in Yolo County by a traditional Yolo County Social Worker. I came from Placer County which operated on the completely different side of the pendulum, our CWS foundation was opposite. So, we had to come together and have these open conversations about our methods and practices, and this allowed us to meet in the middle to really understand each other’s perspective and practice. Throughout the years, we’ve developed enormous respect for one another, and we identified each other’s strengths and weaknesses. We now use our various trainings, experiences, and perspectives for the better. We took the best out of both approaches to develop our practice for DLS.

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

Child Welfare in California uses the same computer tracking system called CWS/CMS. This is helpful because CWS can look at all CPS referrals and cases throughout all 58 counties, you can look at the whole spectrum of child welfare. Another strength is that the counties have embraced different types of CWS practice models in order to improve the system. Counties also have been discussing and implementing a more trauma focused practice, which is what is really needed when working with the high-risk families.

Some counties have more financial resources than other counties. But one relatively new practice in Yolo County is this idea of Parent Partners. Parent Partners are parents who have gone through the child welfare system themselves and then become paid county employees who help current parents with child welfare cases navigate the system. The Parent Partners provide lots of coaching and another level of support. A lot of time the parents just need somebody who can spend more time with them. Their once a month contact with the social worker is not enough. A Parent Partner is coaching them on how to get through this and identifies barriers that county social workers might not see.
What are some of the weaknesses of the child welfare system in your area?

In California, we don’t have enough social workers and the turnover is high. To really understand the child welfare system as a social worker, you need a good five (5) years working within the system to have a firm understanding and grasp of it. This is problematic with the low staffing and high turnover. CWS has a lot of social workers who are brand new.

Many of the case plans that families receive during their CWS case can be very “cookie cutter”. Even now, with new services and programs that weren’t available 5-10 years ago, many of these families are just getting the same exact plans. The kids are going to therapy once a week, parents are enrolled in parenting classes, parents are doing the same drug and alcohol treatment programs – the 12 steps medical model. And for some people, those plans work, but they don’t work for everyone. **Enrolling everyone in the same type of plan or program is a huge limitation and/or barrier for parents trying to reunify with their kids.** For many of the families, the programs don’t address language, cultural barriers, past trauma, parents with intellectual delays, poverty issues, systematic racism, incarceration, significant mental health issues, etc. Even if these families complete these plans, it’s like “checking boxes.” **We shouldn’t want families to just check tasks off a list, we should want them to get the best services and help to fully mend their families.**

Additionally, the goal is to help the parents become self-sufficient so they can support their families. Typically, you need to go to work to support your family, but CWS often is requiring parents to spend two hours per day in parenting classes and three hours per day at treatment programs. We need more innovative programs and plans for families. Parents are really struggling doing these “cookie cutter” case plans. Many people are struggling with these services that might work for some mainstream Caucasian families, but may not be very effective for other populations, especially populations of color.

We also have many Spanish speaking clients and very few services provided in Spanish. That is outrageous that these clients are sent to English-speaking programs, but it’s still happening.

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

Don’t argue with your case worker, don’t fight with them because it doesn’t work out in your favor. Focus on your case plan and getting that done. Work with case worker and try to view the open case and services as an opportunity. We focus on figuring out how can we get this case plane done. We try to help families learn something out of this experience, so they won’t continue getting involved in the child welfare system.

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Describe some of the efforts Dependency Legal Services has made to improve child welfare practice in your area.

DLS is an amazing organization. Having attorneys who are open to having social workers involved in their practice is exceptional. We feel like this multidisciplinary approach should be the model for all dependency counsel. Lawyers are trained very differently from social workers. Social workers are able to look at the bigger picture and assist attorneys with the overall plan, but also assist the families in the moment as it pertains to psychosocial issues. Social workers are able to talk to families in different ways than the attorneys can. The attorneys and social workers share the same end goal, but how we both get there is different.

John and David, the founders of DLS, are really forward thinkers and are always thinking about the best interests of these families. It really does feel like they’ve [John and David] given us opportunity here, they’re treading new waters. There is not a lot of research on the effects of social workers and attorneys working together on dependency cases, but this teamwork is so needed. I hope this is an upcoming field for social work. I think it’s also great that DLS is giving social work interns an opportunity to see child welfare cases from the other side before they work for CWS. We’ve had interns share that they have a better understanding of the child welfare system at the end of the year because they’ve seen it from the other side, from the parent’s side, from the kid’s side.

We really appreciate DLS bringing us on as social workers and trying to train other future child welfare social workers. When we worked in child welfare for CWS, none of the dependency attorneys visited their clients in placement or in the home. A ton of kids would be in the child welfare system and people seemed to just believe that because they’re in the system, they’re being taken care of. The kids might have gotten some services, but we didn’t really see or talk to them. So, we really appreciate this multidisciplinary team at DLS, and how we look at different angles instead of just the legal angle. Without a multidisciplinary approach, kids often feel like they’re voiceless and no one checks in to see what they need. Just because they’re in care doesn’t mean that they’re okay.

What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare? Or to individuals considering working in child welfare?

We try to teach all of our interns that we have an opportunity but also a responsibility to these families. When you knock on the door or when you’re on the phone with clients, it’s a tremendous responsibility and you really need to sit with that. We’re not normalizing the child welfare system or what’s happened, but it’s important to be respectful and look at this as an opportunity to help. In our world, when you say you’re a social worker some people immediately conjure up a negative connotation. They look at you negatively because they might have never had a positive interaction with a social worker in their life, especially if they’ve been involved in the child welfare system previously. It is an opportunity to change perspectives, that’s what we always tell our interns.
You have the opportunity to go into someone else’s home – nowhere else do you have that experience. Really, don’t take that lightly, it is a huge responsibility and opportunity.

When working with families, put all of the stuff you’ve read, heard, thought you know, away and just listen. Listen to their perspective and where they’re at. Figure out how to build relationship with these families, intervene on their behalf, and really help them. When families don’t have a relationship with their social worker, it makes it so much more difficult to complete the case plan and reunify. A lot of the parents involved in child welfare have their own trauma and experiences with the system that they’re bringing to the table, be mindful of that.

Honesty is important as well. Explain to families that you’re not law enforcement, you’re not trying to bust them, you’re trying to help. And if families or parents aren’t doing the work, I am honest about it. If they fail a drug test, I will hold them accountable and tell them, “I don’t want you to fail, I want you to succeed, but I can’t do it for you.” I ask them to be totally honest with me and tell me how exactly we can help them and what specifically they need.

I also feel like anyone who wants to go into social work really should work in child welfare. The experience is so invaluable. You learn things that you can’t necessarily learn from reading a textbook. Your experiences in child welfare shape who you are as a social worker. The interns that we have are planning to work for the county after this internship. So, we're presenting ideas that there is another side to all of this, another world. Hopefully, these interns will consider the other perspective when they work for the department.

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

My advice to CWS is to try to keep social workers. The continuum of care for services for families is terrible. We have some families who have had four different social workers, this is setting these families up for failure. No one knows who their social worker is at the moment so there’s no chance for a relationship. There is lots of confusion. Families don’t know what they’re supposed to be doing or where to go. One social worker is telling these families one thing, another is saying something else. Referrals get lost and there is so much miscommunication and confusion as new social workers are assigned to families. And these families already have a huge hill to climb just by completing their case plan. We don’t need to make things more difficult for them.

Retention is huge and better retention would solve a lot of these issues. It’s a very valuable asset for the department to keep a social worker. But to keep these social workers, we need to figure out a way to address the burnout to allow social workers to continue doing this work.

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On top of this, I hear families say, “why am I even trying? It’s so impossible.” The system is chaotic and confusing for them and we make it more so by assigning new social workers all the time. If the system is going to remove kids, they need to take full responsibility and offer a full range of services and every opportunity for these families to succeed.

I would like to see judges receive more CWS and trauma-focused training as well. In Yolo County some judges who have never worked on dependency cases before began presiding over these matters. Judges need more training on what’s reasonable and what’s possible for these families. These judges serve two-year assignments in Yolo. That first year they’re learning what is going on and by the time they understand dependency in the second year, they’re moving on. I also think that in some counties, it feels like the judges will do whatever the department recommends. There is no questioning of the department, whatever they say, goes. There needs to be more checks and balances within the system.

Are there any preventative practices or programs that you think would be most effective in avoiding conditions that lead to foster care?

Some counties employ a Parent Child Interaction Therapist (PCIT), a counselor who helps during visitation. These therapists counsel the parent, they act like a parent coaching in real time, while the kids and parents are together during the visits. This works so much better than just having parents sit in a parenting classroom while information is spewed out at them.

A lot of counties were doing voluntary family maintenance cases, but many of those programs have gone away. In Sacramento County they have a program called “Informal Supervision” – intensive family maintenance program to prevent removal on some of the higher risk cases. I would like to see more of that, family preservation services that are more intensive. It seems like counties are getting away from that though.

Oftentimes, child welfare gets a report, goes out and investigates, and puts a band-aid on a bigger issue and the case closes within 30 days. This practice doesn’t work in some cases, really there are no services being provided. There are also some families who would call and explain that they need help and CWS had the resources to help them. Typically, these families wouldn’t have the money to pay for drug treatment programs or whatever they’re in need of. Now, many counties aren’t even offering these voluntary services to the families who seek them out. This is perpetuating a huge problem where the kids ultimately end up being removed because nothing was done to help the families beforehand.

About 20 years ago when California was doing the Redesign legislation of its child welfare system, a practice that was implemented was the path 1, path 2, or path 3 response system. Path 1 meant that CWS was calling and just checking in on you. It meant that CWS became aware of a family, but they were not going to investigate or go visit that family, they would just let the family know what services were available to them. The purpose of this was to address any issues that a family was experiencing at the very beginning, before it turned into a child welfare issue. Path 2 meant that CWS visited the family with a family resource community member. This community member would help CWS talk to the family and they’d explain that there is a problem and they want to help the family resolve it right now. Path 3 would lead to a full CWS investigation. So much more prevention needs to be done. A family’s first interaction with CWS shouldn’t be the removal of their children.

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Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so, what are they?

The public has this misconception that all parents involved in child welfare are all using drugs. People seem to treat child welfare families almost like second-class citizens in a way. I think the media only highlights the really bad physical abuse cases. The public only sees the worst of the worst. This is not a good representation of the families involved in the child welfare system. When’s the last time you saw a news story on a family who reunified and how well they’re doing? We just don’t, those stories aren’t covered by the media. I understand privacy concerns with this. But I’d like to see the department using the media to introduce themselves to their communities and explain, this is who we are and this is what we do.

The system has developed from a more punitive place. Families don’t believe the department is there to help them. There are very few people I can think of through the years who said, “Oh, thank God child welfare came knocking on my door.” Which is so unfortunate, it should totally be the opposite. After an experience with child welfare, people should be saying, “Thank God child welfare got involved because they saved my family.”

It’s on the child welfare system, the department, to change that perspective. They can only change that perspective by changing how they interact with their community. The department and child welfare system need to become more involved in the community.

Was there any experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?

I don’t have one specific family that I’ve worked with that’s been a turning point. I think doing the work we’re doing right now, I’ve had some experiences with families whose kids I removed previously, and now I’m seeing the effects of that removal and how the kids that were removed years ago have a greater chance of coming back into the child welfare system. I’m looking at these cases differently now, I’m assessing whether I could have done something different 15 years ago, instead of removing the kids. I now recognize the huge impact that removal has on a family.

One thing that I’ve noticed with families that tend to succeed is that there’s this sense of resiliency already there. And that resiliency is shown throughout the case. There is that thing that causes a parent to say, “I’m done, I want my kids back, I’m done with this life.” Once parents make that decision to get their kids back, they kick butt on their cases. While working for DLS, I did see this process start to happen for one family I worked with during a family CFT meeting. I was there for representation for the father. The mother was defensive. Finally, Dad just stated, “I’m done, I don’t want this for me, and I don’t want his for my kids.” There was this incredible shift, he was feeling defeated and voiceless, but he started to see why the child welfare system got involved, what mistakes were made, and how he could overcome them and do better for his family. Within months he was able to successfully reunify with his children. Which is what this whole process is all about.