Amanda is an Assistant Attorney General at the Washington State Attorney General’s Office and represents the Department of Social and Health Services in dependency and termination of parental rights cases. Though new to the legal profession, she has gained the admiration of many including her opposing counsel, who states that she has demonstrated compassion, encouragement, and hopefulness in the performance of her duties. Her nominator believes that even though she is often in a position of advocating for separation of children from parents, she has demonstrated that she will make every effort to maintain family relationships, to seek and support reunification whenever possible, or to seek less restrictive resolutions than termination of parental rights if such an outcome can be achieved.

Amanda approaches and assesses every case with fairness and does not view any case from a winning versus losing perspective. She demonstrates understanding and patience in cases where the path to reunification is neither quick nor simple, and has an ability to maintain a humane and sensitive view of families in a process that very often becomes dehumanizing to them.

To get a better idea why Amanda was nominated as a Reunification Hero please read her inspiring interview below.

_By Kathryn Byers, J.D. Candidate 2016_

**Tell me something interesting about yourself.**

I am a voracious reader! I read 1 to 2 books a week. It is something I always enjoy doing in my free time because it provides me with new perspectives on the world. I am very into Scandinavian crime books right now. They are well written and fast paced with insight into Scandinavian culture. I’m not as interested in non-fiction because it is nice to have the escape from everyday life that fiction provides.

**What made you interested in child welfare?**

Well, in law school I wanted to be a legal librarian. I didn’t think that I wanted to be a practicing attorney. After I was out of law school I was clerking for a judge who presided over child welfare cases, and I became inspired by the work I saw the people in the field doing. That’s when I thought I will give this field a chance and became a practicing attorney. I applied to the Washington State Attorney General’s office and now cannot imagine doing any other kind of work.
How long have you worked in child welfare?

I will have been working at the Attorney General’s office for 1 year on July 7th.

What types of positions or roles have you had during that time?

I am new to the child welfare field. I clerked for a judge who presided over juvenile dependency cases and then accepted my current position with the Attorney General’s office almost a year ago.

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

In this job, the work I do is split between office work and appearing before the court. The weeks where I am doing mainly case-prep in my office it is easy to forget that the people I am reading about are my fellow community members. One experience that has had a big impact on the way I think about reunification happened during my first couple of months in this position. One day after a court hearing in which the court ordered that a child be removed from a mother’s care, I witnessed the family’s goodbyes. To watch a mother say goodbye to her child was a heart wrenching experience regardless of the circumstances of why it had to happen. It is a reality of this work that sometimes it is in a child’s best interest to be removed from his or her family for health and safety reasons. That being said, that experience solidified for me that my job is to strive to get those parents in a position so hopefully it becomes in the child’s best interest to be back in his or her parents’ care.

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

I believe that all attorneys and GALs are an asset to the child welfare system in my county. They are incredibly experienced and dedicated to helping families reunite. No one is here by chance. This work is too difficult to stay in long term if you don’t believe in the overarching goal of keeping kids healthy and safe and hopefully reunifying families. I include the judges in this group. The judges here are compassionate and want the same outcomes that we do because they are invested in the community. This is a small community and the people we see are our neighbors. All of the parties in this system are invested in making our community a better place not only for children, but for the entire family.

What are some of the weaknesses?

Personally, I would like to see greater community access to mental health resources and drug and alcohol rehabilitative services. I think that as a community, we need a greater focus on the mental health and well-being of our community members because those issues directly affect the lives of our children. I personally believe there is a public health crisis occurring not only in my community but in the nation regarding how we approach mental health and drug and alcohol rehabilitative services. In my opinion, no parent or person wants to be an addict or chooses to suffer from mental health issues. Those two categories of concerns are pervasive and have far reaching effects in our communities. That is why I think as a community it is necessary we make a statement and concerted effort to show that all lives have value and we are invested in making our community members successful and healthy parents who will raise healthy and happy children.
Describe some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?

With every family’s case that comes across my desk, I try to approach it with a fresh perspective. Regardless of where the case is in the process, I think it is never too late to try to problem solve. In my opinion, this is a position of privilege to work for the families of Washington State, and it creates an obligation to go the extra mile for each family. The ultimate goal is child welfare and safety. The primary mission of my position is to advance the best interest of the child. This interest sometimes, but not always, coincides with reunifying a family. In the cases where those interests align, I do everything in my power to set parents up for success so that goal is met and families reunify if possible.

Some things I have done in particular to effectuate that intent is to approach the parents’ attorneys in a collaborative manner rather than in an adversarial way. Often we have similar goals. I think it takes all interested parties to address the specific needs of each unique family and to really be creative about getting those families where they need to be. I try to always ask how we can do things better for each case? What is missing here? Why is this not working? Sometimes I cannot change the course of a certain case, but other times asking those questions has made a case that was a couple weeks from a termination trial end up in a trial return home a couple months later. There is no zero sum game in this work, at least not from my perspective. I feel privileged in doing this work and based on that I feel personally responsible to explore every avenue to protect the best interest of a child while also hopefully making a parent capable of parenting.

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

I know it can be difficult for any parent to trust the process because the removal of a child from a parent’s care is traumatic. I would tell parents not to lose faith or hope in the people working with them and trying to help them be able to successfully parent. The primary purpose of my work is to advocate for the best interest of a child. Part of that advocacy includes providing resources to parents to help them become better parents. This is something that in my experience takes time. As a parent you have to be willing to sort yourself out and take ownership for your actions. That means acknowledging why your child was removed in the first place, whether you think that was fair or unfair. It is a terrifying and complicated time for a parent. I always try to remember to put myself in their shoes and understand the obstacles they are trying to surmount. The experience is different for each family, but those that I have seen be successful have acknowledged and engaged in the process.

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

I would tell them to above all things be creative! I know there are timelines, standards, and rules that we must follow and uphold. However, I think this work necessitates that we think outside the box because each family is a unique family with special needs, and that means an individual approach is needed for every case. We should never forget that we are responsible for real families in our community. Our duty is to protect the best interest of children while also serving those families to the best of our abilities and resources.
What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors or the president about how to improve the system?

I touched on this a little bit before, but consideration must be given to the issues that affect a parent’s ability to parent such as mental health issues and drug and alcohol abuse. These public health issues affect all levels of society. In fact, in my opinion we should be trying to interact with these at-risk parents before they even enter the child welfare system. I would love to see the provision of funding for more public services so that families do not get to the point where they need the assistance of the child welfare system.

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

Washington has a group called Snohomish County Parent Advocacy Committee which runs a program called Life During CPS. This program is run by parent allies. These are people who have experienced the system. It is a great support system for parents and provides them with someone who can give them hope of reunification. I think this program is effective for parents because it serves as a mechanism through which they can navigate the system and not feel alone. This program embraces the idea of a community coming together to help these families both while the family is part of the child welfare system and also once the family has left the child welfare system. The program recognizes that the issues that bring a family into the system are often life-time needs that require continual support and attention. This program works to create that community structure for families so they can be successful both in and out of the child welfare system. Information about SNOPAC and Life During CPS may be found at the following Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Snopac-Snohomish-County-Parent-Advocacy-Committee/756816137685660

Are there programs/practices that are not effective and need to be changed? If so why?

No, I believe the people I work with strive to tailor expectations and services to meet each family’s special needs. In my experience as a public servant, we are always reassessing a family’s needs and striving to tailor the assistance we give to each individual. I would argue the change needed is greater funding so all services can be expanded and create greater access for our community members. Increased funding would make our jobs easier because we would be freer to creatively address the needs of parents and families. Being able to work as a team to choose and provide a parent the appropriate service to address an issue that has a negative impact on their life is what makes this job a pleasure. We get to problem solve for families.

What programs/practices need to be added to make reunifications more likely or successful?

Not to belabor the point but more funding is key. An interesting issue that has come up in a couple of my cases is parents who are of Limited English Proficiency and their ability to access and navigate a primarily English speaking system. Both State and Federal law require accommodation and translation be used to help these individuals access public resources. I have seen this in play for multiple individuals and have watched them be successful. That being said, I think there is a cultural component that will need to be addressed in greater measure by the entire community as our population grows and changes. There is no one shoe fits all approach to this work, and I hope to be a part of the conversation about how we can greater address the needs of our diverse and blossoming State.
**What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?**

The success of a community should be based on its ability to help those most in need. In my opinion, this again means funding! In an ideal world we would have a public forum where issues are talked about openly and resources are provided at little to no cost to people in need of assistance. The ability to access services needs to be in place as well as the desire of individuals to access those services without fear. Instead of treating issues like mental health as an individual’s problem, I think they need to be addressed as a public health issue.

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

It is a traumatic experience for everyone involved whether it is the children, parents, extended family, or even family friends. I am often referred to as a prosecutor because families perceive my role as one who acts in a way that is detrimental to the family. That is not what I am here for. My first purpose is to keep kids safe and advocate for their best interest. My second and related purpose is to help parents hopefully get where they need to be to successfully parent. We serve families. Nothing makes me happier than a child being returned to a successful and stable parent and knowing that I helped make that happen.

**Is there anything else about you or your experiences that we should highlight?**

I am continuously impressed by the people who help to put families back together. All of us experience true joy in seeing families successfully reunify. There is nothing more rewarding than watching a child go home and that’s why we are here.

*The views espoused in this interview are those of Amanda Beard as an individual and do not necessarily represent the views of the Washington State Attorney General’s Office or Attorney General Bob Ferguson.*