Georgia Makes Family Reunification a Statewide Priority with New Reunification Manager Position

Although adoption tends to be highlighted as a common outcome for children in the child welfare system, the primary and preferred permanency goal is reunification with parents. To better support the reunification of families, the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) recently created an innovative, new position: Reunification Manager. This position is tasked with providing statewide guidance on reunification. Through the development of state-level leadership and expertise, DFCS hopes to give reunification the same level of priority and same chance at programmatic success that it has seen in other areas, such as adoption and kinship care.

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What Does a Reunification Manager Do?
While each caseworker is responsible for helping to preserve and reunify families, the Reunification Manager takes the lead on the quality of reunification efforts throughout the state. The Reunification Manager is responsible for analyzing reunification trends, creating a strategic vision to strengthen reunification efforts, and developing practices and programs to:

- keep children in their homes whenever possible,
- reunify families in a timely manner when children do enter foster care, and
- help families stay together after reunification.
In September 2018, Samantha Walker became Georgia’s first Reunification Manager. Because the relatively new position is still being developed, Samantha finds that each day in the role of Reunification Manager brings something new. One day Samantha might consult in the field regarding facilitating reunification through the provision of services, while another day she might work closely with the safety team to ensure certain conditions are met before children can be returned home. At other times, Samantha provides training, consults on cases, researches, and analyzes data. One of her crucial functions is looking for trends across the state regarding barriers to reunification and strategizing on how to tailor support to each county.

The Impact of Focusing on Reunification
Through this position, Samantha is able to make a positive impact for families throughout the state. In one case that ended in successful reunification, the family had been involved with child welfare for over a year due to the mother’s struggle with substance use. When her children were removed, they were placed in foster care with a family who provided strong support for reunification through frequent visits, partnership, and peer support for the mother. Thanks in part to the support of the foster parents, the family was successfully reunified. The families still maintain contact, showing the enduring bonds created by the experience. Samantha shares that one key to success stories like this has been refocusing foster recruitment efforts to find families who support reunification and are willing to partner with parents.
Tips for States Considering Creating a Similar Position

Given that reunification is the ultimate permanency goal of the child welfare system, other states may consider following in Georgia’s footsteps. The position was first suggested by Tammy Reed, the Placement and Permanency Section Director of DFCS, who noticed that despite having multiple teams focused on adoption and kinship, there was a lack of leadership and expertise on reunification. Tammy shares a few tips for states interested in creating a Reunification Manager role:

#1: Use the Mindset Behind FFPSA to Expand Reunification Efforts

Although the position was not created with the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) in mind, one piece of advice that Tammy suggests is to take advantage of the mindset and values behind FFPSA to expand thinking around what should be included under reunification efforts. This could include looking at how evidence-based services can impact children across the continuum of care, whether to help children stay at home, shorten the time they spend in care, or provide families with post-reunification support so that once children go home, they stay home.

#2: Increase Public Awareness and Support of Reunification

Another recommendation is to grow public and institutional support for reunification through events such as National Reunification Month. This June, Georgia is hosting fourteen Reunification Celebrations throughout the state to bring families, agency and court staff, CASA, service providers, and community members together to celebrate the work that goes into reunifying families.
One recent celebration featured an outdoor picnic, complete with snow cones and a mobile gaming truck. During the event, a local judge spoke about the court’s role in achieving timely reunification and special recognition was given to families who had overcome obstacles to reunify. The event also celebrated foster parents who support reunification and staff members who are passionate about preserving families. To reach people outside of these celebrations, DFCS is also recognizing local “Reunification Heroes” in social media and local news outlets.

#3: Build a Strong Reunification Culture in the Agency

In addition to raising awareness, Tammy and Samantha use these celebrations to help create an agency culture that supports and encourages reunification throughout the year. They find that the events tap into the undeveloped potential in field staff, who are excited to celebrate their reunified families and share their success stories. Tammy believes that reunification is at the core of the work and “at a state level, it’s really an opportunity to create morale boosters for our staff who are doing the work and haven’t had the opportunity to celebrate the reunification that happens every day.”