Though Victor Sims is only 23 years old, he has decades of experience in the child welfare system. After spending the first 11 years of his life in foster care, Victor was adopted into a loving family, an experience that motivated him to pursue a career as a case manager at One Hope United in Florida. While reunification was not possible for him and his parents, today Victor makes reunification his priority with every family he serves.

Victor was nominated by one of his clients who credits him with her reunification with her children. She described how “he brought my kids home when no one knew a way to make it happen” and said that “he has continually been a champion for change.”

In all his interactions with parents, Victor strives to understand the root causes of their problems to help them “look at the barriers in their life and turn them into stepping stones.” He focuses on building on families’ strengths to allow children to return home safely as soon as possible, often using innovative methods to forge relationships with parents and ensure that the family will continue to succeed long after their case has ended.

By Lucy Kates, University of Oklahoma, BA Candidate 2020
What made you interested in child welfare?
I spent 11 years in the child welfare system before I got adopted. I have advocated in the system for the last five years statewide and nationally. My life has been child welfare.

I went to a lot of different foster homes, good and bad. Luckily, mostly good. I ended up being adopted with one of my four biological sisters. This experience has helped me understand the importance of family and allowing children to be placed together. We’re changing family dynamics every time we remove a child from their parents.

I went into foster care at three months and stayed until I was 11. My parents’ parental rights were terminated when I was 1. I didn’t even meet my sister until I was 8—siblings weren’t the priority. I didn’t have a relationship with my other siblings at all. Fortunately, I see this shifting now, and the system seems to make more of an effort to keep siblings together.

In the beginning I thought being adopted was the greatest thing. I didn’t have to move homes or change placements so I was so excited. A few years after being adopted I felt like I had a crisis. I had to learn how to live somewhere permanently. If something goes wrong you can’t just leave—you have to learn how to say sorry and make it work. The system doesn’t teach you how to do a lot of things.

We have to make foster families a support for families and not a substitute for parents. The community believes they’re a substitute now. You’ve got to be willing to work with the parents because they usually have a lack of support.

How long have you worked in child welfare?
I’ve worked in the system for two and a half years. When I was in college I definitely didn’t plan to do this. I was creating a curriculum for Youth Live, a policy center. We were trying to help teenagers change the conversation from “what do I want to be when I grow up” to “what problem do I want to solve.” I asked myself that question and realized I wanted to fix the child welfare system. It’s all around broken. My focus isn’t changing the world, it’s changing how a child and family see the world. If I can do that, I feel like I’ve succeeded. I hope to change how they see their situation.
I came into care because my mother was in a domestic violence relationship. When I get domestic violence cases now, I have to help people see how to make their situation healthy. A lot of the fathers who have aggression have a root cause. I try to figure out what needs weren’t met when they were younger, and figure out how to meet those needs now. Sometimes a parent lost their own parent when they were younger and that became a trigger for their substance use. We have to prevent the triggers before we can address other things.

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

Me being in care. In my case, reunification would not have been the best option. My dad was in prison and my mom had serious mental health issues. When I look at it, there are lots of families for whom reunification can work. As a community we forget that it does take a village to raise a child. Parents need help. The community has to sometimes fill in gaps. Sometimes I wonder what life would’ve looked like had I grown up with them. Even children who are in the most ridiculous situations still want to be with their parents, and I try to make that happen. I've never asked to terminate a parent’s rights. If you truly try to work with a family, you will usually find a way to help them have a healthy relationship. I believe government has to figure out how to strengthen the family unit. We need to add more people onto the front end of the child welfare system to help families and prevent problems rather than focus on terminating parental rights and getting kids adopted.

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

I think the focus on conditions for return is the biggest strength. We ask ‘What can we do to get the child home safely while the parent is receiving services?’ We’re good at looking at what the parents are doing to improve and helping them get their kids as soon as possible. We work to the finish line together.

I worked with a father who had a positive drug screen for nine months. I told him that it was a good thing that he was at least showing up for his screenings, and that his level of usage was going down. I focused on the positive. If I had been another negative person in his life, he would have felt like a lost cause. He just had his first clean drug screening and I’m super excited for him. It looks like he’ll be getting his kids back in the next month.

**What are some of the weaknesses?**

We focus so much time on the allegations rather than the solutions. I try to be very forward thinking and ask parents what they need to fix their problems. I get very engaged and spend lots of time with parents when I first meet them. I tell them that I work for the system but I’m not a system, I’m a human being. I share my experience as a child and how my mother lost parental rights and tell them that I don’t want that to happen to them. I use “we” language so they know that they’re not doing this alone.

I had a case with a 17-year-old who was aging out of the foster care system. He was committing crimes and struggling greatly. While his mother wasn’t perfect, I sent him back home because I could see that she’d give him better care than the system was providing him, and I wanted him to have that relationship with his mom once he was an adult. We have to look at the vulnerabilities of the children and figure out how they’re best served.
Describe some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?

I look at Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which says that people can't worry about higher-level concerns until their most basic needs are met. This works especially well when parents have substance use problems. I give them a thirty-day grace period to get clean to figure out if it’s truly an addiction or just a habit. I want them to get a step further ahead than they were when they got involved. They are already so stressed out that I don’t want to give them too many more responsibilities right away. I look at the barriers in their life to figure out how they can use them as stepping stones.

I recently got a job offer that would still be in the child welfare system but wouldn't involve direct services. It paid more and was a good offer, but I wasn’t excited. I love the craziness of being a case worker, as crazy as it sounds. I like my job because it focuses on the family unit. I really have a passion for children and families and reunification. We go through the motions of making a “reasonable effort” but often don’t really do all that we can. We need to be more deliberate and persistent about the efforts we're making.

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

Being up front in the first meeting. If I know all your problems and struggles right away, I can work with you to figure out a way through them. I only know the obvious problems and not the underlying causes, so you have to tell me about that. That’s why I’ve been so successful in reunification. I really try not to be negative with families. If we’re both saying that the system sucks, we’re not going to have any energy to work on moving forward.

Cases come in all the time and sometimes it's aggravating. The reward for closing a case is getting another one. When I leave, the family still has to be able to operate. They have to figure out how to make things work. If I’m the only one supporting mom or dad, it’s going to fall apart after I’m gone. If we get the whole family involved, they can help each other in the future. We need all the members of the family at the table more than they need me at the table.

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

I help with people going through training at our agency and I tell them to work in the system without working like the system. True social work is trying to work as a human being, whereas the system sometimes just focuses on checking boxes off a to-do list. I seek out people who have the right thought processes to work with families, and I focus on getting families services as close to home as possible. My advice would be learn how to be innovative and think outside the box. With innovation we can improve the child welfare system. If we want to improve the way children and families see their situations, we have to get involved in new areas.
I would also advise professionals to take mental health days. Taking care of your mental health is a form of preventive care. When you’re around people who need help, sometimes you forget that you need help too. You have to take care of yourself before you can put effort into others.

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

I would ask judges to understand how high our caseloads are. Sometimes they recommend things with incredibly fast turnaround and they forget that that’s not possible given how many other families we’re working with. I’d ask legislators to figure out how to drive down caseloads.

I got promoted to lead case manager in less than a year after I started working here. I think that’s because I’m really good at understanding relationships. I’ve even asked judges to shadow us for a day so they can understand what it’s like to be a case manager. Sometimes they don’t process how unrealistic their expectations are. It makes it harder for every other family we serve if a judge makes an unrealistic decision with one case. Once a judge asked us to give a parent six hours of supervised visits a week. If I did that with every one of my 34 cases, I’d never go home. I can’t possibly do that. So I’ve suggested alternatives like having visits at the child’s daycare facility, for example, so there’s someone there to ensure the child is safe.

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

I think our model for return is great, but we need to become more solution based. I’ve just gotten more innovative in figuring out how to bring kids home. Best practice is not always common practice and vice versa. We have to figure out what is the best way to serve this family, not what the state says is the best way to serve them.

I worked with a father who was very aggressive and threatening whenever he met with people in our office, but he still showed up every week. I told him that I realized how much he really loves his kids, and that he needed to start being there for them at home and in other situations. We started talking through his problems, and I began to realize what the causes behind his anger and aggression were, which enabled me to see him in a new light.

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

We need to start looking at the vulnerability of children and their visibility to the community. We need to ask more critically what actually puts a child in danger rather than resorting to removing them from the home right away. It’s supposed to be a temporary system but sometimes we end up coming up with permanent solutions.

We’re about to test out a new system wherein one case worker is assigned to the children and one to the parent. We hope that will help us make sure everyone’s needs are being met, and most importantly increase parent involvement.
What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?

The country just passed the Family First Prevention Services Act in 2018 and I love it. It’s all about preventing cases from coming into care and preventing families from reaching the point where kids having to be removed from the home is necessary. I would like social workers to be present in hospitals to assess potential ACEs [Adverse Childhood Experiences] when kids are born and early on in life to prevent problems before they arise. I believe 90% of parents I work with are parenting the best way that they know how, and they could do better if they were given more help right away. We talk about permanency rather than strengthening the family. If we can strengthen a family, permanency will follow.

If we can strengthen a family, permanency will follow.

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

When I tell people about my job, they imagine we’re just here to take people’s children. We actually focus on strengthening the family, and sometime taking the children out of the home is necessary to do that. Keeping kids in the system and away from their families is never our priority.

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

I’m honored to have been nominated! You definitely don’t do this for the money, you do it because you really hope to see better outcomes. When I was in foster care I never wanted anyone to know. I felt like I’d rather be in jail than in foster care. There’s so much we can do to make a traumatic experience less traumatizing. We have to find a way to normalize it.
June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm