

Korina Barry ([00:26](#)):

Boozhoo/Hello everyone. Thank you for tuning into the CASCW podcast channel. In today's episode I chat with Ashley Rooney. Ashley is a child protection worker working in the area of investigations, which means she is currently still working on the front lines and is considered an essential worker. Ashley is also a graduate student studying social work and she's a title IV-E child welfare fellow. In this episode, Ashley shares more about how the pandemic has impacted her work life and her educational experience during the early weeks of the pandemic. Ashley also shares ways that she is coping and taking care of herself way. She's staying connected with her peers and her graduate program as well as connecting even more with her colleagues at work and continuing the really tough and challenging work of child protection and even more challenging times. So we hope you find this episode helpful and that you are able to pull out some tools and resources for yourself. Enjoy.

Korina Barry ([01:31](#)):

Well, thank you Ashley, for joining me this morning. To talk a little bit more about how COVID-19 is impacting your life and your work in direct practice. Could you introduce yourself and share a little bit more about your role and education?

Ashley Rooney ([01:47](#))

Absolutely. So my name is Ashley and I currently work in child protection as an investigator. I've worked in child protection for four years now, so it's not too much of a new career for me. I am currently getting my master's degree in social work at the university of Minnesota. I'm a IV-E scholar. Um, so what that means is that I'm taking a special path and concentrating on children and families and looking at the child welfare system.

Korina Barry ([02:16](#)):

Thank you for introducing yourself. So how are you adjusting to everything?

Ashley Rooney ([02:18](#)):

I'm adjusting. There's a lot of changes in a very short amount of time. Um, so that brings its own set of challenges. But I think, you know, change can be good and with the right support and experience that goes with it. So things are different, but it's okay.

Korina Barry ([02:33](#))

Are there any, you know, even small things or techniques you're finding yourself utilizing and just kind of day to day coping and navigating change right now?

Ashley Rooney ([02:42](#))

Yeah, I would say, you know, what I do is I try to do a lot of like mindfulness exercises, meditation, you know, just different things with the mind to kind of calm and just reposition yourself and center. I like to walk outside in nature, so even though we're on, I'm still able to get outside in nature, go for hikes in the woods and um, when the sun's out, make sure I am feeling that on my body. So yeah, just really trying to get some exercise in and then also just doing some meditation.

Korina Barry ([03:14](#)):

That's great. I'm glad you're able to get outside, get fresh air, take care of yourself. We're fortunate in Minnesota to have a stay at home order right now that allows us to be able to get outside and still walk our parks and our trails, and do it all at a distance of course. And, and keep each other healthy. Can you share a little bit about how your work supporting children and families and your role as a child protection investigator? Like how has that been impacted so far by COVID-19?

Ashley Rooney ([03:42](#)):

Yeah, there's been a lot of changes. One of the biggest one that stands out for me is that kids are in school right now. You know, when we experienced that in the summertime, kids aren't in school usually in the summer, but it's a different experience because you know, in summertime if kids aren't in school, they're still involved in usually an activity or some kind of daycare or summer camp or program where they are surrounded by other safe adults and have people that they can talk to about different things in their life. Um, so right now with Minnesota being in quarantine, we have all these kids that are home with their families, but they aren't able to see other people, other adults, other safe people in their life to talk to if something's going on. And so that has really impacted our work on a day to day basis.

Korina Barry ([04:31](#)):

Yeah, I hear a lot of concern of just, you know, individuals, parents, families where many were already under stress and in survival mode and navigating really challenging times. And then you add in the pandemic and the shift to distance learning and food insecurity and so many other, you know, mental health, substance use, everything is feeling heightened and, and we still have kiddos who are in, you know, some of those homes where safety could be a big concern. So with your work, you are on the front end of a case, what has that looked like and being able to respond and actually do your work? You know, as I imagine reports are probably down right now, like as you said, schools are out, a large number of our reports come from our mandated reporters and other folks who have that extra safe eye on kiddos. And so even with reports down, I imagine there are still some coming in and just kind of what does that shift look like and how you are able to respond and navigate that work?

Ashley Rooney ([05:36](#)):

Yes, you're exactly right. Um, some of those numbers are down in the fact that we don't have school personnel able to call for children. But unfortunately, what that leaves is, you know, the only people that are seeing kids are law enforcement and medical providers. And so when we do get those calls, they tend to be more serious. So instead of having kind of a mix of, you know, more severe cases and you know, just some other cases in there that can easily be addressed and just meeting with the family and coming up with a safety plan and getting services in there. We're seeing more intense cases right now and as for seeing kids. You know, we're trying to be creative in the way that we're doing that to make sure that we're ensuring the safety of kids but also the safety of workers. I'm lucky in the county I work at that we are being provided protective gear in order to make those things happen.

Ashley Rooney ([06:25](#)):

And you know, asking families questions about if anyone's sick or been in contact with anyone who's been sick. Or trying to meet, you know, if appropriate in more of a public setting like a park or something where the kids can play and we're still able to address safety concerns with families. But it definitely looks different. I mean, child protection workers I don't think always get the image that

they're first responders. Um, but we really are, we are responding sometimes the first person to a scene, um, where something terrible has happened to a child. And so our work has to continue.

Korina Barry ([06:59](#)):

Absolutely. And I'm so glad to hear that you all have received some good guidance and protective gear yourselves. I know we saw the KARE11 story that came out, I think yesterday, about other workers in tougher situations where the equipment is just not available. Even if an agency wants to be able to provide it and because we're low resourced and it's going to our medical care providers. And so yeah, I'm glad that you all are able to be protected and still be able to get out and see kids and families with some of that work. Are you and your agency finding that you're utilizing technology in a whole different way right now?

Ashley Rooney ([07:35](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. I mean when it's safe and we're able to make contact through technology, FaceTime, Skype, things like that, we are doing it. It's definitely a different experience. I mean I have done many interviews over, you know, Skype and FaceTime and things like that these past couple of weeks and people are still willing to open up about their stories and talk, but it's just not the same being on the other side of a screen than it is in person. And a big part of that is just me being empathetic and you know, just wanting to, you can still show with your non-verbals but it's, it's very hard to hear about something terrible happening to someone and not being face to face with that person. So we are still using technology and that has been helpful to make sure that we're still getting our, you know, interviews in and still being able to check on the safety of kids.

Korina Barry ([08:24](#)):

I can only imagine, it's like I think of everything we learned in our training and our education as social workers around building good rapport, trust, and that connection, and how challenging that has to be to navigate all of that via video on, you know, and not have that in person connection. Are you able to or have you been able to connect with your colleagues and are you all finding ways to support each other?

Ashley Rooney ([08:48](#)):

Yes, absolutely. I think colleagues are one of the most important things. And being a child protection worker, um, you have to have support, you have to have fun, you have to have positive relationships with colleagues. And so I'm definitely staying connected with mine on a daily basis. Talking through social media, consulting on cases, venting about things, just checking in on each other, doing some virtual happy hours, things like that. So definitely still staying connected. I know that some counties do work remotely on a regular basis and we've just been talking about how difficult that is because that in-person consulting and just being in the same space to, you know, share experiences, consult on things is so powerful and helpful in this job. And so we definitely miss being in the office together.

Korina Barry ([09:35](#)):

You're talking about the ability to be able to connect with your colleagues and do some case consultation and be able to kind of have a sounding board. Hopefully that includes maybe some good supervision for you as well. Are there any other supports that have been helpful for you in navigating all of these work changes and trying to connect with your colleagues and being responsive to the cases you're receiving?

Ashley Rooney ([09:59](#)):

Yeah, I mean for my position, we've had a lot of change recently with leadership and upper management and so that's been, you know, a lot of change right there and then you add this quarantine and pandemic on top of it. So we really have just been taking it day by day. And so we actually just got a supervisor on Monday. So yes, having that consultation with the supervisor is super important and you know, they're really good about knowing where people are at, what their capacity is, what cases would be good. Um, now that people are kind of working from their home, you know, kind of looking at where people are geographically to see what makes sense for people to respond to things. So that's helpful.

Korina Barry ([10:39](#)):

And if I could ask to being that, I guess I'm talking to you as a person from CASCW, you know, at a research and training center where we work on many different ways of connecting with our frontline workforce and getting training and content that's supportive and accessible to you all, and knowing that other national groups do that same work. And I think we see everyone right now just kind of like, what do we do? How do we support, how do we not add to just the myriad of information and the overload. And so I'm just wondering for you in your personal perspective, you know, we're seeing lots of free webinars and lots of things launching to online format as quickly as possible to be accessible for folks from home. Does that additional training and resources feel as helpful right now? Or is it just pretty early into this and everyone's overwhelmed, and maybe not right now?

Ashley Rooney ([11:30](#)):

You know, I think is helpful to have online webinars and you know, free CEU's and all that. But for me personally, being on the computer all day for work and then all day for class we're doing, you know our classes over the internet, over Zoom, it's too much screen time for me it's too much sitting, it's too much staring at the screen and so I'm not utilizing those things at this. I think they are definitely helpful for some people who maybe aren't working on the computer all day. But again right now with working on the computer as much as I am, it's just, it's too much to do to add additional things online.

Korina Barry ([12:06](#)):

Do you have any concerns for child welfare? You know thinking short term, long-term kind of how the system and this work is going to be impacted. Of course, the children and families at the center of this, and what this is meaning for them and just wondering if you have any thoughts to share about what worries you, what concerns you have?

Ashley Rooney ([12:25](#)):

Yeah, you know, I think you definitely touched on it. I think the uncertainty of all of this and how long it's going to last is really stressful on families. It's easier to deal with something when you know, when you see a light at the end of the tunnel or you know, you know, approximate time of when that's going to end or change. And right now when we just have no idea, I think it's really scary for families to not know when they're able to leave the house, when they're able to get their jobs back. Um, we have so many families that are unemployed now when unfortunately some of those families are here illegally and they aren't able to access the funds that the government has offered. And so just like we said, the stress of, you know, having kids home now full time. I mean I think people forget that when kids go to school, that's a big break for parents to be able to have time to themselves, work, do other things and now they have kids home 24/7.

Ashley Rooney ([13:19](#)):

So again, I just think that uncertainty of how long this is going to last is my concern for the families and the system. And the other thing I would say is just the worst thing that can happen is the death of a child. And in all of this, like I said, with having less mandated reporters or less safe people around to check on kids, I worry that something like that could happen and it just puts the system back. Like we always talk about it kind of being on a spectrum. And you know, as soon as we try to go one way and keeping kids in the home and safety planning and then something horrible happens and we go all the way back to every child needs to be taken out of the home, if there's any concerns. And so I really worry about that happening during this.

Korina Barry ([14:02](#)):

In what ways in your community and the community you're serving, what ways have you seen community showing up for each other?

Ashley Rooney ([14:10](#)):

I would say just in like the food insecurity. Having schools stepping up and providing food to families of kids of all school ages is huge. Um, even having those two meals a day, it makes a huge difference. Um, for families. And you know, I've just seen other like posters and things around just talking about if you need help getting groceries, call this number and we'll drop them off. Things like that that I know mean a lot to the families who aren't able to pick up five kids or four kids and get to the store right now or don't have money for gas or things like that.

Korina Barry ([14:44](#)):

That's been really heartwarming to see, to see the way community can show up as a collective and kind of take the "it takes a village" kind of mindset and belief of how can we care for each other when we're all on this roller coaster of emotions right now. And you mentioned a little bit earlier how your education, your educational experience is being impacted. Can you share just a little bit more of what that's looked like for you as a title you fellow in the MSW program and just how rapidly that has changed for you in the last few weeks?

Ashley Rooney ([15:17](#)):

Yeah. You know, it really was amazing how quickly the whole program was able to go online, shift all of their lessons and speakers and all that online. But you know, it's really been pretty successful. I'm able to still see classmates over Zoom, we're able to still have discussions. Um, and even I think something that I'm really happy that's still happening is having speakers because I think that's so important to hear from people that are actually in the field. Um, they give a different perspective than maybe what the textbook says or a professor who's been doing this a long time. And so I've really appreciated the fact that we have speakers that are still appearing through some of these online platforms and we're still able to ask questions and do all that. So that has been really helpful. And I think that learning online is definitely a different perspective, but I think it can still be very helpful. And so it's just shifting your learning style to be able to work with online. I think the information is still there. And so it's just figuring out how you as an individual can take in that information, process it and be able to use it.

Korina Barry ([16:22](#)):

Have you found that you and your peers and friends in the program, are you connecting more and in different ways, you know, after all these changes?

Ashley Rooney ([16:32](#)):

Yeah, I would say that, you know, in the social work program there's a lot of group work and so, um, professors have kind of gave the option of do you want to continue group work or do you want to do individual? Um, and other professors have just kept continued the group work. And so for those kinds of projects, absolutely we're talking more over Skype and FaceTime and zoom and things like that to plan our papers and plan our presentations and projects. So that has been helpful. But I would say you're mostly only connecting with the people. I mean if you're put into a group, then you're experiencing new people, but if you're choosing your group, then you're connecting with people that you already have connections with. And so when you're not in the classroom, it kind of takes away that ability to converse with other people from maybe different areas and things like that.

Korina Barry ([17:20](#)):

I know for some students and some IV-E fellows who are in the MSW program, were currently in field placements. And for IV-E fellows that has meant some of them were in county or tribal placements that have been impacted very abruptly and they had cases and families they were working with that there was just this hard stop of, of that connection. And I think for you that's looked a little different, but I'm just wondering if for your field placement, has that impacted what that looks like for you and moving a field placement in the next year?

Ashley Rooney ([17:50](#)):

Yeah, I mean I think it is so hard to ask an agency or a county right now to consider taking an intern when they're just trying to stay above water and be there for their families, be there for the community and be there for your employees. So I think it's asking a lot to take on a person who is looking for this educational experience. It's not like you can just take someone and it's an extra body. Like there's a lot of teaching and a lot of, um, mentoring that happens. And so I'm, I'm worried for, you know, what field placement looks like in the fall. And I don't blame, you know, any agencies for saying we can't take anyone right now. We can't provide that experience that they need. So yeah, it'll be interesting to see what happens in the next couple months.

Korina Barry ([18:33](#)):

I know folks are rallying and trying to do their best to pull as much together as they can for students. And also, like you said, like understanding and having that grace for counties and tribes and just other agencies even for our IV-E fellows of just like how, how can we support each other through this?

Ashley Rooney ([18:51](#)):

Yeah. And I think it just goes to show that this is real life and hard things happen and you have to adjust to them and everything can't be planned. Um, that's not how the world works. And so it, it's a good life lesson. Um, I think for everyone to experience and figure out how you're going to respond to it and be flexible.

Korina Barry ([19:11](#)):

It's definitely giving us lots of moments of just like slowing down, needing to take a breath, thinking longer before we react and out of making a plan. And how do we, how do we move next? So we've talked about some heavy stuff, challenges, concerns, but I'm wondering what also is giving you hope right now and what gives you hope as you think and you look into the future and what that looks like?

Ashley Rooney ([19:34](#)):

You know, I would say like despite this scary disease, you know, going around that is taking people's lives and impacting families and our community, that there's still so many people that are doing great things and that really gives me hope to see that this isn't pushing people down. It's bringing people up. And you know, the quarantine is very hard for a lot of people to be cut off from support, from family, from friends. And so I think it gives people perspective of maybe how some people have to live. You know, you think about like domestic violence situations or things like that where people are cut off from their friends and family and forced to, you know, live this other life. And so what I have hope for is that people, you know, take a look at their own life and like you said, just kind of slow down and realize how lucky we are to have the things that we have be grateful for the friends and family that you do have. And you know, I just hope that this brings ideas to people about what things that they can impact or continue to change as this moves forward.

Korina Barry ([20:38](#)):

So Ashley, knowing that more online videos and webinars may feel overwhelming at this moment and knowing so much about everyone's work has shifted to Zoom and Google Hangouts and just a lot more screen time, case noting documentation. Are there other ways from your perspective that researchers, trainers, folks kind of creating this content? Are there other ways that we should be considering or thinking about or that feel helpful to getting information to you all during the pandemic?

Ashley Rooney ([21:10](#)):

You know, I, I do think that online is the quickest way to distribute information and get it to people. You know, one thing that comes to mind, and I don't know how feasible this this is, but for me, I like to have hard copies of things. Like I know CASCW has had, you know, a little laminated books or things like that that that's helpful for me to have a hard copy of something to look at and to review. And you know, it depends on the topic and all of that. But even just going to the mailbox is like a daily activity. And so to have something in the mail from cashew, I think that could be exciting. And you know, I love to read the bulletins, um, and different additions that cashew sends out, but I like to read them in a hard copy instead of online. But again, then there's, you know, environmental impacts of doing that and things like that. But that's just an idea. I would have to change things up from online and still be able to get information to people.

Korina Barry ([22:03](#)):

Ashley, what are the concerns that you have in thinking about how this experience can maybe in some ways completely change the way the child welfare system operates or change the way frontline workers engage and protect and identify safety for children and support families. Do you have any additional thoughts on what that could look like?

Ashley Rooney ([22:26](#)):

Well, you know, I think the main thing is that as a frontline worker, as an investigator, you have to have eyes and ears on the situation. It is very hard to assess for safety from afar. And so I worry about the ability to have that opportunity to be assessing a family when you're in their home. We've been given, you know, some suggestions of like show me the house over FaceTime or things like that. But people are very smart and it's very easy to hide things in a situation like that where it could lead to a potentially dangerous situation with kids. And then I also, you know, think about like substance use and as a frontline worker, we are the ones that are testing our clients. And so when you take that away and

you're expecting clients to get to a place to be tested, I think puts a lot of strain on the family. And it also opens up a lot of opportunities for things to go wrong in not being able to get to the place. And then again, we're putting children at risk if we don't know what the home looks like. We don't know if there's drugs or drug paraphernalia laying out. So my concern is just that we're not able to do our jobs the way that they're meant to be done to protect children.

Korina Barry ([23:37](#)):

So we're seeing a lot related to the pandemic and COVID-19 around health equity and disparities, disproportionality of communities of color, black communities, native communities being at higher risk and of course other vulnerable populations. And from what we know of and the child welfare side of disparities and disproportionality and those same, you know, black children and black families, native children, native families being overrepresented in that system. Just wondering if you are already seeing those kind of two kind of collide and an impact or if you can see that happening. You know, whether it's more loss in those communities due to the pandemic and what that means for families in a community, and then what that means for potential and increased involvement in the system. That makes sense.

Ashley Rooney ([24:26](#)):

Yeah. I think that, you know, I haven't personally looked at too many numbers right now in, in my area, um, regarding race and you know, um, who's impacted by COVID-19. But one thing that I think that could be positive coming from this in the social work world, we know that these minorities are being overrepresented and we fight to change policy and we fight for equity. Um, we're advocates. And I think that this just brings to light for all the other people who, you know, maybe haven't went looking for this information and now it's being presented. Look at the communities that have, you know, a high population of, um, minority people look what's happening to them. And it's shining a light on what we know has already existed, was already there. And so I think in a way it could be good that these things are being brought to light, but it's just how policy responds to it, how the whole world, what they'll do with that information that they're learning.

Ashley Rooney ([25:25](#)):

I think that we have to change the view of community and mandated reporters for how minority families are, what their culture is, how they respond to parenting, things like that. Because that is why we have these numbers of higher minority populations being reported. Because you know, people may not agree with the practices or people may not understand what that means and so they're reporting it out of good faith thinking that they are protecting a child or sending somebody in to look into it but not maybe recognizing the damage that they are doing to these families.

Korina Barry ([26:00](#)):

And earlier we talked a little bit about ways we see community showing up for each other at this time. And just wondering if you have any thoughts or ideas on ways that the public, the community can show up and support, you know, frontline child welfare workers at this time and even those children and families that are maybe at risk of involvement with that system right now?

Ashley Rooney ([26:23](#)):

Yeah. You know, I think what the community could do to help, you know, frontline workers is be a neighbor. Be able to help your neighbors, reach out to your neighbors, see if they need something. Um, sometimes it's, it's something so little as um, needing a can of something for food, needing a box of mac



and cheese, something to help the family, you know, one good deed from a neighbor or community member could be the difference in child protection. Getting involved or not, you know, neighbors or community members recognizing or knowing. I know that mom lives in there with lives in that apartment with five kids and knocking on the door and giving them a puzzle or you know, a book from the dollar store, um, with some colored pencils and activity to do. So. Really reaching out and connecting with neighbors I think is the best thing our community could do right now to support children and families. And you know, we always talk about, you know, it's hard to intervene. It's really hard for people to intervene. They feel like it's not their place, but that is what we need right now when we don't have the ability to have workers out in homes like we used to just having a neighbor, you know, if you hear crying in the next apartment for an extended amount of time, go and knock on the door, see if there's something you can do. Things like that.

Korina Barry ([27:38](#)):

Yeah, so really thoughtful suggestions and simple, you know, as you said too, sometimes it has to push us a little out of our comfort zones to be more supportive neighbors too. So thank you. Yeah. Well thank you so much Ashley, for joining me and taking some of your time to talk with me a little bit about how this pandemic is impacting your work and your life in so many ways. I know you're so busy and we are very appreciative of you kind of sharing a little bit of your perspective and we're hopeful that other folks that are able to listen to this episode, you know, kind of find some tips and tools and some hope and navigating the coming weeks and the knowns and unknowns of what those coming weeks are going to look like. So thank you again for joining me.

Ashley Rooney ([28:22](#)):

Yes, thank you so much, Korina, for having me.

Korina Barry ([28:27](#)):

This podcast was brought to you by the center for advanced studies in child welfare. This podcast was produced by Korina Barry. Our series editors were Denise Cooper and Cliff Dahlberg. Music was composed by big cats and this podcast is supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota department of human services, children and family services division. For more information, please visit the CASCW website at [cascw.umn.edu](http://cascw.umn.edu) thank you for listening and stay well everyone.