

Korina Barry ([00:28](#)):

Boozhoo (Hello) everyone. Thank you for tuning into the CASCW podcast. We hope you have been enjoying our "it takes a village child welfare and a pandemic" series. In today's episode I chat with Becky Tripp. Becky is a child protection supervisor at Wilkin County, which is located in Minnesota. During our conversation, Becky shares more about how COVID-19 has shifted child welfare practice so far in her county. She also highlights some of the ways that rural communities are being impacted as well as what resources are available and what resources are still needed in rural areas. I hope you enjoy the conversation and are able to pull out some tools and helpful tips for your own practice. Enjoy.

Korina Barry ([01:18](#)):

Thank you for joining me today, Becky. To talk a little bit more about how this pandemic is impacting your life and your work and your team and your community. Could you introduce yourself and share a little bit about your role?

Becky Tripp ([01:35](#)):

Um, my name is Becky Tripp. I work at Wilkin County family services. It's a small rural County. I supervise 10 staff, all programs, um, child protection, child welfare, all the mental health, developmental disabilities, chemical dependency, pretty much all of the programs that social workers do in the county, I supervise.

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

So you have got a heavy load and lots of moving parts right now. Um, and so even just to start with everything that's happening and all of the changes that are taking place every day, how are you doing? How are you adjusting with everything?

Becky Tripp ([02:13](#)):

Um, you know, I, I think the nature of being a social worker and for me and all of my staff is that we want to be with people. We went into this to work with people and be with people. So the adjustment for most of us are remote working. I have one worker that's still in the office kind of holding it down. Um, but the rest of us are all home bound. We are not doing face to face. Um, except for in child protection issues where it's absolutely necessary. Uh, we have been assisting some foster parents just with um, logistics and moving parts. Um, so we are having some limited face to face contact still with, with kids in placement. Um, but you know, I think it's a combination. Everybody is very grateful that we have the capacity to remote. We, um, we were able to work with our it people.

Becky Tripp ([03:16](#)):

So when the governor's orders came down, we were ready to go. We had our VPNs, our County, um, historically has not remote worked at all, so we had nothing in place. But, you know, a few weeks before the order when we kind of saw the writing on the wall. Um, our, IT people were able to get us all set up with VPNs, relocate our computers to our homes, make sure internet connections were good. So, you know, as far as, as the continuity of work, it's been really good. Um, except for, of course not having to adjust to doing the telecommunication. Obviously a lot of barriers with that. Um, the nature of the population we work with, um, many of them don't have computers. If they have smartphones, they're

on prepaid plans. So they have a lot of limitations on how much they can use it and stuff like that. So, you know, there've been challenges, but I think the staff is adapting relatively well. I mean we layer on that they're all home with their children. They're all trying to homeschool their kids. Um, it's just, it's been a lot, but I think, you know, we're, we are human services workers. We are resourceful and we're resilient and we're just making lemonade left and right here

Korina Barry ([04:45](#)):

For sure. It's like we're used to navigating crises and having to be quick on our feet and just adapt very quickly. Are you finding, so you're in a, as you mentioned, a smaller kind of rural community and outstate Minnesota and you all are, have moved to teleworking. Are you finding that you, all, you and your team and your colleagues are connecting more and different ways? Obviously with, um, maybe virtual meetings and stuff.

Becky Tripp ([05:14](#)):

So we did a zoom staff meeting this morning. We were doing all of our child welfare screening over soon. And um, my staff and I are constantly, have always been constantly in contact. So that didn't change. Just they liked being on zoom. They like being able to see each other and check in. And so screenings over zoom, um, because we're small, we screen as needed. So that's not like a regular meeting that happens. It's just like, Hey, we got a report, we pull up a zoom meeting and we do it. Um, our law enforcement, our County attorney, everybody has, is always very available to us. So that hasn't changed. We've just adapted the way we do it. Um, we had staff meeting this morning just cause everybody wanted to see each other check in, um, over zoom. So I, I think everybody is doing good.

Korina Barry ([06:14](#)):

Yeah. And for folks who may be listening or maybe just learning about the child welfare system and kind of the, the steps that take place along the case and when you're talking about these steps virtually, could you just share just a little bit more of like what is, what does screening mean and what does that look like and kind of the conversation you're having.

Becky Tripp ([06:30](#)):

So, um, when we receive a child protection report, um, we're required to screen it using the screening guidelines developed by the department of human services, which I actually have, um, on my desk right next to me right now because somebody, we, I mean we can pull them up online too, but sometimes it's just easier to page through them. They're long, they can be a little complicated. So when when we get a report, we do multi-disciplinary screening. Um, and because I supervise all areas of social services, it's seems like it's a bit easier for us because if, um, if the report concerns chemical dependency, um, developmental disabilities, mental health stuff, anything like that, I just pull in whatever workers that I want their expertise as far as screening the report. Um, we also consult law enforcement and our County attorney when we're screening to see, um, how they feel, what they feel the report, if they feel it should be screened in, screened out, if they think it's meeting the statutory requirement for us to be involved. So that's kind of, I know a lot of counties like screening every day, but because we're small, we just screen when reports come.

Korina Barry ([07:52](#)):

And while we're talking about reports, I'm just wondering, you know, we're seeing, I mean nationally and probably even globally with everything that's happening, domestic violence, uh, situations and cases

and reports are rising and substance use and mental health because of isolation and everything. And I'm wondering if you all at this point are seeing an increase of any of that or, or not necessarily yet as far as kind of the reports and supports kids and families are needing right now in your community?

Becky Tripp ([08:24](#)):

I am in constant contact with our domestic violence person. Um, she's saying reports are up, we're not getting a lot of cross reporting from law enforcement. And I've reached out to them and they said that they've had some increase reports for domestic violence, but there isn't necessarily children involved. Um, so they're not cross reporting those. So, um, there is an increase in domestic violence reports. Um, but not just child protection related, um, the workers that do mental health are very, very busy. They are doing, um, daily check-ins, sometimes checking in multiple times a day with mental health clients. That's been a struggle. Those clients are also historically, um, have a lack of resources so they don't necessarily have computers, reliable smartphones. Um, you know, providers are wanting to set up counseling and services and the clients just simply don't have the capacity to do it.

Becky Tripp ([09:34](#)):

Um, so mental health, um, very, very busy chemical dependency worker, extremely busy. She's doing her Rule 25 assessments now over the phone and that's been a little challenging. Um, but for child welfare right now, um, our reports are down. We, you know, we're also in constant contact with our schools and they're letting us know, um, what, what children that they're concerned about. Um, families that aren't really engaging in the remote education process. Um, just kind of keeping us aware of where they're at. We're not going to be doing truanancies and education on neglect, but you know, if, if it's, if there are families that, you know, we've worked with in the past, we're reaching out to them and offering to support, making sure that, um, they know that there's, they're doing education vouchers for internet access. But that's a challenge for families too. I mean, if you're on a prepaid phone and you only have a limited amount of minutes and you call to get your free education voucher and the internet provider has you on hold for 30 minutes, well that's not working for anybody.

Becky Tripp ([10:48](#)):

And our internet providers haven't been able to let people access that like over the internet. And that's a challenge because if you don't have internet, you can't get on the internet. So I mean, a lot of the challenges that we're accustomed to dealing with simply because, you know, some of the people we work with have limited resources. They've just really snowballed. And normally we would just send a worker out there with a laptop and we'd say, Hey, let's do this. Send a worker out there with a cell phone. Hey, let's do this. But you know, we can't do that. We can't be face to face. Um, so that's, it's frustrating. Um, and a lot of places won't let the workers just call for people. They want people to actually call for themselves. So just some of the barriers that we're working through.

Korina Barry ([11:41](#)):

Yeah. And barriers that are, like you said, they're layered on top of existing challenges and vulnerability. And I'm wondering if you all are seeing or maybe anticipating or hearing anything about future resources or supports that might be rolled out or coming and thinking of things like, um, technology and equipment for families for the workforce. Like I don't know if you've heard anything, if there's any, um, groups or even the state, if there's any conversations that you're a part of talking about. How do we, um, pull some of this together for the folks who, who are struggling to access

Becky Tripp ([12:21](#)):

In the grants that we do receive from the state. The state has, you know, given us a lot of leeway in how we use them. But because we're a small community and low population, those grants are small. So, you know, we still have to choose wisely on where we're going to put our resources and how we're going to use them. So certainly, I mean it would be wonderful if somebody would just donate a few hundred computers that we could distribute. Um, and then we would still have to work through the issue of getting internet up and running. But because, you know, we're a small rural community, the schools don't have computers for every child. So, you know, some kids were sent home with Chromebooks, others weren't. Um, I know one of our rural schools doesn't have, um, computers at all, so they're kind of working through the remote education a little more difficult, you know, then the school that could just send home a Chromebook. Um, so yeah, challenges. So I guess in a perfect world somebody would send us out a whole bunch of laptops and a bunch of cell phone minutes.

Korina Barry ([13:31](#)):

I guess in thinking of other concerns, you and your staff and your workers that are typically able to have kind of hands on face to face contact and support with children and families in the community, are there other concerns or issues that you all are navigating related to resources and are there ways that you're seeing, uh, even community show up and support each other with some of those things?

Becky Tripp ([13:58](#)):

The schools are doing meals, they're providing breakfast, lunch. Uh, but the barrier for that is that there's three pickup locations, but you have to pick it up yourself. Um, that's, you know, an issue. You know, not all of our families have reliable transportation. Um, you know, if you're a single parent and you've got, you know, a few children, you've got a, if you don't have a car, how are you going to get to the location to get the food? Um, even if you're a single parent and you need groceries, you know, you've got to get to a grocery store, but you're not supposed to be taking your children out into the community, but you have to take them because there's nobody else. And, um, you know, just kind of our, you know, we're a rural, a lot of people use family, friends, relatives for childcare. Well we've taken away a lot of childcare options. Um, you know, people are trying to be very respectful and minimize exposure to older and vulnerable populations. Well, what grandma's your primary caretaker and now GRA you know, you're, you're kind of in that uncomfortable situation. Um, we have a lot of very low income families and many of them, I'd say low, middle class to upper. I know we have a kind of a strange income structure in our County. Many of our workers are in farm related manufacturing or farm related work. So they're considered essential. They're continuing to work. Um, they continue to have access to take cares as much as daycares can and are taking people. But you know, too, they make a little bit too much for childcare assistance. So a lot of them use informal childcare, like grandma and grandpa or relatives or neighbors.

Becky Tripp ([16:03](#)):

Well, we've kind of, we've made that kind of a risky business, you know, so they're at manufacturing, they are technically exposing themselves or they're at risk of exposure because they're, you know, they're in places where many people work and so when they're coming home to their children, like they're possibly exposing kids. But then if you want grandma to babysit the kids, you know, people are smart enough and aware enough to realize that you know, what exposure means. But when you're reliant on, on quote free daycare from grandma you, it's just a really difficult position to be placed in for a lot of our families.

Korina Barry ([16:50](#)):

I'm thinking too of the wellbeing of workers and our workers that are essential still. And um, a lot of the conversations we're having with different folks around that child welfare workers should really be, um, uh, acknowledged as first responders and especially on the front end of this work. And you have workers who are still needing to go out in some cases and, and make that face to face contact. I'm wondering what that experience for them has been like as far as like one, have you all been able to pull together protective equipment or is that just like, you know, we, because of the lack of access, we don't have that. And then also just like how they're taking care of themselves during all of this too.

Becky Tripp ([17:40](#)):

So we do not have any protective gear except for just like the homemade masks. Um, we're asking that if they absolutely need to be face to face, you know, whether it's kids that we have in foster care and the foster parents need help or what have you. We're asking them to, to wear masks. Um, but yeah, it's, we haven't had to do a lot. Um, I actually went out on a removal last week because I have no one to, I mean, I have nobody at home to expose, so I'm not risking anything except for my own health. Um, my dad was pretty disappointed in me because I couldn't go to his house for Easter. And he's like, yeah, but you're, you're, you're sitting home alone. You're not exposing yourself. I'm like, yeah, but I did. And now I can't come to your house. But you know, I, the workers, my workers, my workers that have underlying health conditions or just staying home and staying safe, the ones that are healthy and pretty confident are just being cautious and doing as little as they need to and still be comfortable with the safety of their families and children.

Korina Barry ([19:02](#)):

When you think of short term or even maybe longterm changes to this work to the way we serve children and families or even just at the end of this and whatever that even means, like just do you have any concerns about what this all looks like?

Becky Tripp ([19:18](#)):

We're nervous. We know that, um, you know, in a small community there's a lot of eyes, a lot, you know, eyes on everything. Everybody. But when people are kind of locked in their houses, um, we don't have eyes on situations that we, we have a pretty good feeling or not good. Um, and you know, that exists everywhere. It's just in a small community, you know, a little more. So we're, we're very concerned, like on the back end, what we're going to find has been happening with, um, with a lot of families that we've just been supporting ongoing over the years that are kind of left out with no really support or assistance. Um, if we don't have an active ongoing child protection case open, then you know, we're not reaching out to people and they all know that they can reach out to us. But that's tricky too.

Becky Tripp ([20:28](#)):

Um, workers, um, they said that the one really positive thing that they can see is that, um, we have been asking our local providers for years to embrace telemedicine because just the nature of a rural community and the issues we have with transportation and people's difficulties just getting here, they're with themselves, their children. Um, but our providers have been reluctant to do telemedicine well now they've all been forced to. Um, so we're very much hoping that when this is over that they, um, I mean obviously the restrictions on acceptable platforms being lifted has really helped. That was what they all identified as barriers was those HIPAA compliant platforms. But we're hoping that when this is kind of

fading out and it's all said and done, that the providers are gonna, you know, kind of have woke up and like, Hey, this isn't so bad that this telemedicine stuff does work and it is okay. And that, that's actually gonna increase the opportunities for our rural people to have access to mental health services. For sure.

Korina Barry ([21:40](#)):

Yeah, that's huge. And hopefully something that can stick in the longterm, you know, from what I have learned just a little and being able to throw work at the center and get out and connect more with our out-state communities and counties that you all really know how to kind of rally together and support each other. And I'm just wondering if you have seen some of that in your community and even the surrounding counties, if you all have been able to, you know, consult, come together, support each other through all of these everyday changes and challenges?

Becky Tripp ([22:20](#)):

Um, well, so like in our community we, we had some individuals put together a whole bunch of Easter baskets and donate them. So then I w you know, some of my workers were able to identify our families that, you know, probably wouldn't have Easter baskets otherwise and kind of just drop them off at doorsteps. So that was, you know, it was really nice. The kids loved it. And, um, you know, that's just one of the ways we have a local, um, food chair that's done through a church and the church was able to get them to come in and extra time and, um, set that up so that people could just kind of drive up. They put the food in their cars, they moved on. So the community, you know, has been really good about, um, just making sure that there's food available, that people know how and where they can get it. Um, but again, you know, just transportation, there's, there's, there are limits. I know that our rural schools are actually sending the school lunches out on the bus route so that, you know, people, the rural families really just need to go to where they, kids would have gotten on the bus to pick up the school lunches. So it's been really good. Um, you know, we're lucky we do have a very generous small community and there is any type of need like that. Um, all we have to do is ask and we get it.

Korina Barry ([23:51](#)):

That's great. And you know, I'm also wondering for yourself, and I mean you talked about how even just the work you as a, as a leader and supporting your staff and just being, needing to step in and go out and do a face, make face to face contact and how that's impact then impacts and kind of that domino effect of your personal life and, and just wondering if there are, if there are ways or like techniques, things that you are finding helpful in coping with the everyday kind of changes and challenges that you're navigating as well.

Becky Tripp ([24:27](#)):

I don't know if I have any like huge epiphany. Um, I guess, um, so one of the things that I'm encouraging my staff to do, um, since you know, a lot of social work is face to face time. So when you take away our face to face time in rural areas, you've taken away our windshield time. Um, a lot of the meetings have been reduced, are shortened, are not happening. So I'm telling workers if you have extra time, I want you training. And um, I promote, I suggest that my workers, um, kind of use Brene Brown. I, I'm just a huge fan and I'm like, you know, she's got Ted talks, she's got lots of YouTube, she's got a podcast now. I bet you she's not your gal. Find something, some kind of, something to inspire you and to just kind of keep you positive and upbeat. And so that's where we are kind of, you know, we, I've been able to give my staff the ability to train in times, you know, on the clock and I send out just um, suggestions for, you

know, Hey, this training looks good, you know, upbeat training, positive training, not, we've got enough doom and gloom on the news. Um, so just trying to promote self care for staff.

Speaker 3 ([25:59](#)):

I love Brene Brown as well. I've recently discovered that she has a podcast now and I have binged all of the episodes. It's so good. And everything of what you're saying. And as a social worker, as just her personality and her knowledge and skills, like she does such a great way, like taking tough topics like a pandemic and what's happening right now and like bringing a lighter love, lighter spirits and positivity and hope to it. And, um, so that's great. Great suggestion. When I know too, you mentioned earlier like if someone wanted to rally and donate a couple hundred computers, that would be great and so helpful. Um, and are there other ways that you can think of that, that people listening, um, can be supportive or helpful to child welfare workers, to children and families involved in child welfare at this time? You know, whether small ways or, or bigger ways.

Becky Tripp ([27:07](#)):

Um, you know, I just, I always encourage people to remember that, um, you, you don't know everyone's struggles, you know, what, what you, what you see, you can't necessarily understand, um, the scarcity of resources, the difficulties that some families are dealing with as far as mental health, chemical dependency, domestic violence, um, physical disabilities. I mean, the families that we work with, some of the families we work with, um, they really have a lot on their plate. And to just not judge people and try to, um, help the best you can. If you see that there's something that somebody could use, um, just try to, to help them without judging them or making them feel like, like they're, I don't know, not make them feel bad about it. Um, I know that it's, you know, it's easy to see people that are struggling with chemical dependency issues and, and judge them and, and judge how they're choosing to use her resources.

Becky Tripp ([28:20](#)):

Are there times or parent their children, but especially right now, um, just with the way things are, I think we need to set aside our judginess and I mean, and that's something that we as, as social workers are pretty much always doing is, you know, we're, we're setting aside, um, we're setting aside those issues and we're trying to focus on how can we make things better for kids and for families. But I would just say as a community, um, I, you know, and especially in small rural communities where, um, a lot of families, we have known them pretty much their whole lives and we've seen their lives play out and we've seen some unfortunate decisions being made. Um, you know, for right now, let's just set that aside and see if we can focus on just helping each other and getting through this and making sure everybody has the food they need, um, place to live, that they feel safe and that they feel like they can ask for help if they need it.

Korina Barry ([29:23](#)):

Yeah, it's a great time to find humanity and come together. And Becky, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to share about, you know, any of this, the, the work you all are doing? I mean, we have, we've talked a lot about the child welfare, um, work, some of your mental health. I don't know if there's some of that you, you're overseeing and leading many folks. If there are other areas, um, that are impacted, just anything that, um, you would like us to touch on.

Becky Tripp ([30:01](#)):

Um, well, I think one of our biggest concerns, um, has been mental health. Um, you know, we, we have people that we have been working with that we work with. Um, but there are people that historically have had some mental health concerns, have struggled, have but have, you know, managed. And I think the circumstances now are our anchor, right, are aggravating things and that people who have historically been able to manage their mental health symptoms, um, without a lot of outside help, um, they need help and they need to have access to resources and the ability to ask for help. Um, you know, we're making sure that our crisis line numbers out there, we're doing the best we can to make sure people are informed. But it's a very uncomfortable place for a lot of people who historically have been able to manage to, to be there where they need to ask for help.

Becky Tripp ([31:12](#)):

So that would be, you know, one of our concerns is that everybody understands, um, that there's help, there's people out there. I mean, you, you may not be able to get face to face with people, but there's plenty of tele-health out there. There's plenty of help lines and, you know, don't ask people if you see people struggling, just you know, contact them and don't necessarily, you know, say Hey, your mental health seems bad. Just, you know, Hey, you know, how, how, how are things going for you? Is, are you okay? Is there anything, I mean, do you, can I call you bored? Do you want to not talk to people? Like, what can I do to help you? Um, because that is the biggest spike we're seeing is, um, not very, not even the people that we've already been working with that have mental health concerns, but, um, just that everybody's mental health is, is suffering a bit. Just keep an eye on your neighbors and your friends and your family and just be supportive. Yeah.

Korina Barry ([32:24](#)):

Thank you Becky so much for taking the time to talk with me today and to share more about how all of this is impacting your life and your work and the work of your staff and impacting your community. I really appreciate you kind of taking up some of our limited capacity we have right now. It seems to just chat with us more and share more with the cashew audience.

Becky Tripp ([32:49](#)):

Thank you. Hopefully we'll all get through this and move forward.

Korina Barry ([32:57](#)):

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.