

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

Hello everyone. Thank you for tuning into the CASCW podcast. I hope you are healthy and hanging in there during these challenging, and honestly strange times. I hope you are taking care of yourself mentally, physically, spiritually. Maybe that's getting outside and enjoying some fresh air or connecting with loved ones through video chat. Or maybe it's just taking a moment to breathe. Wherever you are at right now with all of this is okay, because we're all there too. And from all of us at CASCW, we want to thank you for taking the time to listen and we hope that this series can offer tools and resources that you can use to continue doing the amazing work that you're already doing. And with that, let's all take a deep breath and then start this episode.

Korina Barry ([01:27](#)):

this morning I am talking with Jamie Sorenson about how COVID-19 is impacting the child welfare workforce around the state of Minnesota. Hi Jamie, how are you?

Jamie Sorenson ([01:38](#)):

Hey, good morning. How are you?

Korina Barry ([01:40](#)):

Good. Good. Hanging in there. Could you introduce yourself and share a little bit about your role?

Jamie Sorenson ([01:46](#)):

Sure. Uh, Jamie Sorenson. I'm the division director with child safety and permanency at the state of Minnesota, department of human services. And so in Minnesota that's the role that oversees child protection, foster care and adoption. And uh, we at the state are working with all 87 counties and 11 tribes in the state of Minnesota.

Korina Barry ([02:06](#)):

It's a big job. Lots of areas of the state. And even within the agency itself at the state that you're having to oversee right now.

Jamie Sorenson ([02:13](#)):

Yeah. You know, it is a lot. But in Minnesota we at the state are considered to be the supervising agency and the County and the tribal local child welfare agencies are really doing the hard work with kids and families throughout the state and are just really championing this pandemic and we couldn't be more proud to be supporting Minnesota workforce.

Korina Barry ([02:37](#)):

And with everything that is happening and you know, so much change every day. I'm also just wondering, how are you doing and how are you adjusting with all of the changes?

Jamie Sorenson ([02:48](#)):

You know, it's interesting at the state we are working from home, so none of us are in our offices. We've all had to learn, you know, WebEx and zoom and other apps and just the technical elements of working remotely, it's gone. Okay. You know, we have lots of regular meetings where we take the opportunity to really do our planning and our work. Certainly people are at home with their kids who are trying to do

school and other things. And so, you know, everybody is faced with different challenges but people are coping and really doing, I think their very best in these circumstances. So I think we're doing okay. You know, it's been a long haul and I think we probably have a stretch ahead of us, but people are making the most of the technology and um, not only are we using it to talk with each other and to do our work together, but we're really using it to talk with MACSSA, County directors, other County stakeholders, tribal leaders and private providers. And so it's been really an experience where everybody's on a different learning curve but really making the very best of the circumstance.

Korina Barry ([03:52](#)):

Absolutely. I think we're seeing in so many ways, just a lot of grace and patience. And support for each other.

Jamie Sorenson ([04:00](#)):

And we get to see, you know, kids in our WebEx sessions in the background. And um, that's been fun as well. So really the dog and the whole family is welcome to our meetings at this point.

Korina Barry ([04:13](#)):

Yep, absolutely. I mean, that's kind of been one of my favorite things cause my own animals. You may also during this conversation, see a cat or two seeing everyone's kiddos and animals, you know, it's a different way of connecting all around, but there's this added layer of seeing each other and our personal spaces that changes the connection. I know this is a big question and we can dig into it as much as we can, but if you could share with folks listening as of today, how has COVID-19 impacted the child welfare workforce around the state of Minnesota, so far?

Jamie Sorenson ([04:49](#)):

COVID-19 is a very serious pandemic and we're very concerned about children and families throughout the state of Minnesota, particularly vulnerable children and families. And we know that across the nation, COVID-19 has impacted communities differently. It's impacted American Indian communities and tribes differently. It has impacted, African American children, families and communities differently. So we really have to attend to this very serious pandemic broadly and accordingly based on the experience of communities in child welfare. One of the things that we think is really an important hallmark of safety is that face to face contact with the child, with the family. And we have to balance that with the CDC and Minnesota health department's advice and recommendations on slowing the spread of Corona virus through social distancing quarantine when that's necessary. And so to strike the right balance and child safety and wellbeing and attending to slowing the spread of COVID-19 so we can flatten the curve so we can give our medical facilities and providers time prepare for what may be around the corner in this pandemic in Minnesota, what we've done is looked at those intersections where there is a record acquired face to face contact and we've made requests to the federal government for waivers and to modify toward video conferencing, telephone conferencing when that's appropriate and safe.

Jamie Sorenson ([06:17](#)):

We've also requested those waivers through our commissioner at DHS and the governor's office. And so the initial face to face contacts in investigation and assessment secured a waiver so that there can be other options instead of that face to face in some instances with monthly caseworker contacts. A very similar thing. But we've got these challenges, right about how important it is for kids to have contact with their families, particularly younger kids. And how do those visitations happen in light of, you know,

some agencies doing those in their buildings that are now closed to the public, other providers that are no longer open during the pandemic. How do those visits get facilitated and how do you transport a child safely in your vehicle to a visit? And when a child leaves the foster home and they go on a visit, how able is the foster home to receive them back and keep everybody safe from exposure?

Jamie Sorenson ([07:16](#)):

So lots of challenges, right? And like what is driving many of these challenges is the lack of personal protective equipment in Minnesota. The lack of PPE is a very significant variable and is impacting the child welfare workforce, kids and families, and how we do our business. So in absence of PPE, we really are striving to make these important modifications to strike the right balance between child safety, wellbeing and attending to social distancing. So there's other practice elements that we have to attend to as well. Our foster parents are really stretched right now. Kids are at home, they're having to help them with school. If a child gets sick, what are the care provisions, how is quarantining happening and so how do we keep the foster care resource in Minnesota strong and vital during this time as well? There's just a lot of policy implications kind of everywhere you turn in terms of how you manage during this particular pandemic.

Jamie Sorenson ([08:13](#)):

And we know that the child welfare system is a system and it's not just the local County and tribal child welfare workers. It's the local County attorney's office, it's the tribal courts, it's the state courts as law enforcement, it's providers throughout the nonprofit sector and all of those partners are impacted by this work. And so video conferencing for court hearings. How does one meet the threshold of reasonable efforts, the important court finding in cases in this current context? When so many service providers are closed and just lots of problems to be solved. And at the end of the day we really have to manage this pandemic and we really have to attend to minimizing exposure to COVID-19 very important for the child welfare workforce because many of our workers, right, they have families, they have kids. We want to keep everybody safe.

Korina Barry ([09:05](#)):

Early on in that question you mentioned in that I don't want to lose or not come back to is you know, in our child welfare system, not just in Minnesota, across the country, around the world, there are communities that are disproportionately impacted and overrepresented in the system and how some of those same communities who are overrepresented in our child welfare system are now also disproportionately being impacted due to health inequities and inequalities, um, in their communities. Related to the pandemic. And again, I know there's not a lot that we know for certain, but wondering what concerns you have or maybe some of what the conversations are already around, like how that might impact us in Minnesota, you know, as time goes on and how the pandemic and how that is impacting some communities more than others. How than we might see that show up even more in our child welfare disparities and disproportionality.

Jamie Sorenson ([10:01](#)):

When we look at the pandemic nationally, we know that there's particular tribes that have been seriously impacted. And we also know that disproportionately African Americans have been impacted not just by exposure and you know, experiencing a Corona virus, but also in terms of deaths. So as we look at Minnesota, you know, when we first started looking at the data from the health department, we were seeing that about 7% of the infections in Minnesota were African American, about 1% American

Indian. And so those seem to be somewhat aligned with how those communities are generally represented in the overall population. But as of today, when we look at the data from the health department, we see that now 12% of the infections are African American. And so it's a pretty, you know, quick climb in a short period of time, right? So when we think about this pandemic and we think about different communities, African American communities for example, reported that people have a higher rate of underlying health issues that presents a problem for Corona virus exposure.

Jamie Sorenson ([11:08](#)):

We also know that many people are, you know, laborers and uh, in the service industry. And so, um, there's people who are not able to stay home from work. They're having to go out and continue to work and they don't always have the PPE that they need to continue with their employment. Also, where do you get your information? There's so many different sources of information. Not all of it aligns. And so, you know, to what extent do people understand social distancing, PPE? What degree do people understand how we have to protect each other in this pandemic? And we also know that there are communities that are going to have a more difficult time getting access to testing. Right? So that brings in concerns about kind of this idea of silent spread, right? We don't really know what's happening with the epidemic in certain communities. Access to health care, you know, not everybody has the ability or the income to go out and get, you know, two weeks' worth of over the counter medications, toilet paper, paper towel, food, the basic provisions that they're recommending that you have in your household.

Jamie Sorenson ([12:10](#)):

So, you know, people are experiencing different barriers and challenges when it comes to how they navigate this epidemic. And ultimately what's going to happen, it's going to impact the rate at which people are exposed and become infected and morbidity and mortality rates. And so what we are working to do is really create those explicit focus areas within our view of the pandemic and to begin to do the outreach and the communication and the information sharing that needs to happen and to be trying to strategize around the basic provisions that people need to stay at home. Essentially they have the ability to do that and the messaging around keeping each other safe and why this is so important. I think we know, we hear very messages about how serious this illness is, right? But like look at the lives that have been lost and it is really a very serious matter here in Minnesota.

Jamie Sorenson ([13:05](#)):

You know, at this point in time there's still more testing needed. And so, you know, we hope at some point in the not too distant future that that testing will increase, that more PPE will become available generally the people broadly. Um, and that will have a better look at really what is happening with the epidemic in Minnesota and how in our child welfare system we can support and attend to the needs of people. We also have to think about the policies that are implemented right now for people. You can't be evicted. There is maybe the ability to delay mortgage payments. You know, maybe people have arrangements with their landlords to delay rental payments. But at the end of the peace time, emergency declaration, what happens then? How do people catch up then on rent payments or mortgage payments? What happens for people who have been in unemployment for a longer period of time or out of work for a longer period of time? Um, and so we're also thinking, you know, post the peace time emergency, our system needs to be prepared with the repercussions of what's occurred during this pandemic.

Korina Barry ([14:04](#)):

Absolutely. I mean everything you're starting to mention too related to the pandemic and impacting people's employment, food security, the ability to provide safe and stable housing, the shift to distance learning and whether families even have the tools and resources to do that and us knowing what that connection to child welfare can be. And so exactly what you are saying about, you know, we can foresee some challenges and some long term impacts due to that. I'm wondering if from the data you all are seeing at the state level around our state, if reports that are coming in related to safety concerns for children or other things, if you're already seeing that impact, you know, if there are already a change in severity in some of these instances and just kind of what that's looked like for the agencies as well as the state to kind of sort through.

Jamie Sorenson ([14:56](#)):

Uh, yeah, absolutely. So, you know, we've seen a 50% reduction in allegations of maltreatment being reported to child welfare agencies across the state and you know, largely from mandated reporters, right from schools. And so kids and families are more isolated and we do hear about increased incidents of domestic violence. We also know, you know, through our data and through other studies that have been done in Minnesota, you know, some of the determinants that drive people toward deeper and involuntary systems like child welfare. So you know, things like a family configuration of five or more children or if somebody has a child with a particular, uh, limiting kind of disability, parental substance use, parental mental health, um, a lack of transportation, right? All of these things can be determinants to, is deeper in systems. And so, you know, we know that there have been kids and families that have exited the child welfare system in the not too distant past that are living with some of those determinants that give us pause or create an additional concern for the safety of those kids and the wellbeing of those families in general.

Jamie Sorenson ([15:59](#)):

And so we are beginning to work with local agencies to uh, reach out and to try to attend to those kids and families that are no longer in our primary system but are at risk of touching our system again. So more of a prevention effort, but at the same time providing information to hospitals, medical providers, and to school personnel about you may want to ask some more probative questions around, you know, what kind of food or if kids are having, you know, the ability to eat at home and just being more vigilant about how kids are presenting when they do have contact with, um, um, through current technology and how school is currently being delivered throughout the state and the different school districts.

Korina Barry ([16:44](#)):

I mean, and I think too, in a lot of these interviews and a lot of conversations just generally and connecting with people more during this time, it seems that there is this theme around just coming together and, or like it takes a village. Right. And so I'm just wondering if there are other ways you've seen or heard community coming together and showing up and showing support for each other that are kind of doing some of that prevention too, even if it's not directly child welfare led or you know, involved.

Jamie Sorenson ([17:14](#)):

Yeah. You know, one of the most recent things I saw this weekend is the ability for people to make masks or other protective personal protective equipment and for them to deliver them to a local fire station. And then those will be, um, broadly distributed. Um, which I think is like really a great way for

community to come together and certainly, you know, a strategy that could impact kids' families and also our child welfare workforce. And so I think those initiatives are really, really meaningful. But you know, I, I agree that, you know, when you look at our state child welfare system and you think about the County and tribal child welfare systems, people are really approaching this and then make from the perspective of kind of that community, how can we support, how can we be helpful and real empathy and regard for the vulnerabilities that people are experiencing.

Jamie Sorenson ([18:13](#)):

You know, as this pandemic really enters into the state of Minnesota, and so, you know, our policies that we've tried to impact and where we're trying to go with interventions is those efforts really towards support and basic provisions. And you know, attending to, we don't want to have kids stuck in the system because of this pandemic and making sure that all of those things are moving forward as well. And that, you know, if a child is in foster care and is positive and experiencing Corona virus that you know, we don't delay them going home if they were planned to go home. Now we build the supports around their families so that their family can still receive them and take care of them and they can return to their family of origin. So they're really trying to attend to the experience of kids and families and to understand that we want kids and families to be together and that as we look at the things we're instituting and thinking about that we do it with just real humanity and regard for some of those most vulnerable around us.

Jamie Sorenson ([19:14](#)):

I think of in particular the public charge rule with those parents who are undocumented or are in the process of securing permanent visa status and citizenship and you know, just the barriers that poses to them in terms of being able to access like foundational things that they may need for themselves and their kids. And I just hear a lot of stories about how community is stepping forward and how people are advocating for everyone to have access to what it is they need to make it through this stay at home provision and to you know, meet the needs of their kids and families and to keep everybody safe.

Korina Barry ([19:52](#)):

And you mentioned some of the policy practice change kind of provisions you all have are working on related and have been working on related to visitation and contact with children court hearings and kind of continuing the hearings and how one engages in that process. Are there any other key policy changes or practice guidelines that have come out or are on the horizon that you think it's important for? Maybe some of our frontline professionals who are listening or community providers still on the front lines trying to fill in the gaps of services for families right now to know.

Jamie Sorenson ([20:28](#)):

Yeah. You know, one, one of the things that we're really wrangling with right now is in Minnesota there was a waiver granted to the fingerprint background studies and the cans studies probing into maltreatment registries and other States. When someone is becoming licensed as a foster care provider, an adoptive parent and you know the fingerprinting facilities, about 50% of them have shut down and at this point in time at the department of human services, the office of inspector general and the background studies area are not processing fingerprint background checks and are not currently doing the, you check into the maltreatment registries and other States. There's also been a federal waiver granted for the background checks for now and for the maltreatment registries and other States you

have to make the request for the information but you can proceed prior to receiving the results. Those waivers are I think not optimal.

Jamie Sorenson ([21:24](#)):

Right. And they are born out of really not having access to fingerprinting. And States just being overwhelmed and not being able to check registries. But at the same time, we aren't relieved from them in a way where it won't impact title four funding in the state of Minnesota. So we have to be very careful about that because that's an expenditure for which we rely heavily upon federal Title IV-E reimbursement. So it's one of those that are very tricky to navigate. And it's about state law in Minnesota. It's about federal law and it's about federal funding. And so how do we kind of navigate through these items when there's multiple players in place and just sorting through the policy and trying to minimize the impact when we know that something optimal is not happening. So there's those kinds of issues, um, that we're trying to sort out and navigate through.

Jamie Sorenson ([22:13](#)):

We're continuing to strive for procuring PPE for the workforce so that there's a better supply of those resources to keep workers, kids, and families safer. So that's an important piece. And then also continued guidance around the continuation of proceedings and hearings and reasonable efforts and those kinds of practices for kids and families to continue with. The visitation to the extent that you can and you can keep everybody safe and social distance. So we don't have necessarily any additional emerging, um, guidance around more elements for face to face contact because it looks like probably in our system we address those at this point in time, you know, do we have the foster care resource that we have that we need for those parents who aren't in our system, who have kids who maybe don't have family in the area, don't have a social network, should they get sick, be hospitalized and unavailable to care for their children. What is the guidance and the strategy around that? So we're thinking about those things as well. They use the DOPA as the use of others to come in and temporarily care for children and my parents are unavailable to do so. So, um, just lots of little different networks kind of along the way to make sure that not just kids and families in our system are attended to, but that we're also preparing for those kids and families that are unknown to us at this time.

Korina Barry ([23:30](#)):

Earlier on, you mentioned how some of the other important divisions like department of health, public health are also actively having to respond and change policy practice in many ways. I'm wondering if at this time if you're seeing any difference or ways that the different areas are coming together for more of a coordinator response that you think would be helpful to share or for people to know. The sharing of information. Um,

Jamie Sorenson ([23:56](#)):

The department of health is really imperative and the strategies that the department of education are employing in terms of continuing education with students broadly across the state is really important. And so we do have intersections established for regular communication with the health department and also MDE. And I don't know if people haven't had a chance to look at the Minnesota department of health website. It is well done and contains such good and thorough information about every angle of this pandemic in Minnesota. And so I'd encourage people to take a look at that. So, you know, at the state we are really intersecting with those other areas of practice within the department of human services, whether it be background studies, licensing, childcare, economic support, behavioral health, et

cetera. Um, we're also reaching out and having those kinds of interactions with MDE and the Minnesota department of public health.

Jamie Sorenson ([24:53](#)):

So very important that the system come together at those intersections. And there are broad work groups out of the governor's office that are really designed to do some of that exchange. And there are also initiatives like the children's cabinet out of the governor's office designed to bring those different agencies and partners together to better address things like what is the current service array and resources across the state of Minnesota. And then also what are the issues that we need to really be teeing up and working on together to make sure that we more comprehensively address the needs of kids and families throughout the state to do it proactively to the extent that we can. So I think those collaborative pieces are in place and I think that they're serving a pretty good function. One of the things that this pandemic has taught us is there are things that happen that require us to be responsive quickly to the needs of kids and families.

Jamie Sorenson ([25:45](#)):

And if we're going to have an impact to be able to engage, change and modification quickly. We are not a nimble system at the state and many of the local agencies. And so for us to secure the proper permissions to make a change in practice or policy, um, takes a level of time that begins to impact how helpful and effective we are as a system. So one of the things that we have to do after this pandemic is not only talk about how do we come to intersect with these other important areas of work within our state, whether it be public health, department of education, behavioral health, et cetera, but also where are we procuring the authorities that we need in the future to be nimble when a pandemic or some other unforeseen, you know, catastrophe or whatever it may be in the community requires us to respond quickly and to change how we're doing business quickly.

Jamie Sorenson ([26:39](#)):

So I think that's one of the things that we really have to talk about. We really have to talk about also our kind of systems behind the work, whether it be the social service information system or the net study system or just these other systems that are supposed to support our practice. But yet they are so integrated into every move we make that they are defining as some respects where we can make deviations and where we can make changes. And so that's problematic as well. So I think it's twofold. I think it is really the intersections. How are we working together and where are we interfacing and how we are comprehensively really looking at the needs of kids and families and doing it as proactively as we can. But then also how are we designing the system to be nimble when the environment and the needs of kids and families call for that.

Jamie Sorenson ([27:22](#)):

And his folks are, you know, it's day by day and we move along. Are there, is there one place or a couple of places that you think are kind of essential places for frontline workers or those other professionals, community providers, serving children and families that may be involved there? A risk of involvement in the system to kind of go to for current policy changes, practice guidance and even future updates as we learn more? Like if there's a webpage or a place folks can subscribe for updates?

Jamie Sorenson ([27:53](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. So, um, the Minnesota department of human services website can, uh, you can drill down and you can look at the different waivers and the different policies that have been implemented. And you can look at the different communications that have gone out as well. And we're regularly communicating with the, uh, child welfare field in Minnesota when we make an update to a practice or policy. And so we'll either do it through a bulletin or we'll do it through an email broadly to a County and tribal directors, managers and supervisors. The ACF children's website I think is also a good place to look for updates on public instruction that they administer to States around different waivers. A really good place to look for information is to, and I know that this takes some time and effort, but I would encourage people to really look at the governor's executive orders and read those because there's a lot of good information contained in those about kind of what's happening just broadly in our state and gives people, I think a lot of insight in terms of how long are we in this stay at home status and just kind of what's happening with this pandemic and the state.

Jamie Sorenson ([28:58](#)):

And if I didn't say this already, the Minnesota public department of Health's website is excellent, and so we're going to continue to meet with MACSSA representatives and County directors two times weekly. It's what we've been doing and we meet as a division every morning. We have two meetings on the books when at nine o'clock and one at two o'clock if we don't need the two o'clock we cancel that, but born out of those convenience. Then our bulletins, emails memorandums to broadly the state, child welfare, local County and travel agencies.

Korina Barry ([29:32](#)):

What gives you hope? Right now?

Jamie Sorenson ([29:34](#)):

There's a number of things that give me hope right now. You know, I don't know, a time in my history in child welfare where child welfare has ever been so necessary and so important and to Anna bear witness to the extraordinary directors and managers and supervisors and child welfare workers and courts and law enforcement and private providers and universities that have hung in there and really stepped up to the challenge. It gives me a great deal of hope in Minnesota. I think governor waltz has provided extraordinary leadership and transparency and moved us all along in a process that made really good sense for all of us here in the state. And so I think people have come together and I think we have made changes and implemented modifications thoughtfully knowing in some instances they're not optimal, but they're temporary and necessary because of this pandemic and just the spirit of people working together, the humanity that you know you can witness and the conversations and the decisions that are made, you know, just give me a great deal of hope.

Jamie Sorenson ([30:46](#)):

There's a lot to be concerned about and there's a lot to worry about. And this is a very, very serious pandemic, but we will get to the other side of it and we will at some point be able to learn from this experience and better our system and our responses on the other side. You know, in the face of I think fear and the unknown because we don't really know what lies ahead in the coming weeks. Knowing that we've got these systems and relationships and structures in place to be talking and thinking and responding, it gives me a great deal of hope.

Korina Barry ([31:18](#)):

Well thank you so much Jamie for taking time out of what I know is probably a very busy and hectic schedule to talk with me today and to share more about kind of what your day to day work is looking like and how things are shifting rapidly, um, every day at the state and around our state. And so thank you again. It was great to talk to you. Thank you.

Korina Barry ([31:49](#)):

this podcast is 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 thank you for listening and stay well everyone.