

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

Boozhoo/Hello everyone. Thank you for tuning into the CASCW podcast. I hope you're hanging in there and staying well. In today's episode I chat with Kim Clemenson. Kim is the Division Director of Ramsey County Children and family services in Minnesota. During our conversation, Kim discusses how her staff have adapted quickly and how child welfare practice in her County has shifted due to COVID-19 so far. Kim also shares how her staff are staying connected and supporting one another and the way she and her staff are connecting with other counties and community providers to best support children and families. During this time, I hope you enjoy our conversation. Make sure to check out other episodes in the series as well.

Korina Barry ([01:21](#)):

Thank you for joining me today, Kim. To talk a little bit about how COVID-19 is impacting your life and your work. Could you please introduce yourself and share a little bit about your role?

Kim Clemenson ([01:34](#)):

Sure. My name is Kim Clemenson and I'm the division director for children and family services at Ramsey County. Um, so what that means is I oversee child protection, children and adult crisis, children's mental health, adoption, youth engagement, foster care, anything, all children's things.

Korina Barry ([01:55](#)):

You're overseeing lots of areas and people and children and families at the center of it. So with everything that is going on, how were you adjusting to everything? How are you doing?

Kim Clemenson ([02:09](#)):

I think I'm doing okay. Its been strange. I'm gonna just say, um, and it all happened so fast that it's just sort of sinking in and it's different every day. But I think, um, we're starting to get, you know, some momentum in what we're doing and um, there's been so much support and so much coming together of people that I really think we're doing okay. We're doing okay here at Ramsey and I think I'm doing okay.

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

Good. I'm so glad to hear. And are there any, you know, specific techniques or ways that you are finding yourself kind of coping with all of the change and just navigating the day to day knowns and unknowns?

Kim Clemenson ([02:53](#)):

Yeah. Well, I think there's a lot, I think we've implemented a lot of new things. And then also old things and then have started a lot of daily communication, which, um, I would like to say we did anyway. But you know, this situation has just made that a necessary thing to do on all levels. So our own teams, the people we supervise, you know, everybody. And um, and I think that's really been helpful and I really liked that and I actually hope that we keep that going cause I think that's done a lot of good. But we've implemented things like, um, we've created a first responder team and that is for workers who really are interested in doing our face to face visits, which continue for child protection investigators as well as our adult and child crisis workers. So that team will go and do any face to face visit with the client that's necessary if the worker who's assigned is not comfortable doing so.

Kim Clemenson ([03:54](#)):

So the good thing about that is that none of our workers here at Ramsey, um, have to go and do a face to face if they're not comfortable. So I really feel good about that and that's, um, hasn't been really utilized yet because everyone is still, you know, doing their job and we haven't had a need for, you know, for a special team. But I do see it coming. We have had more people that are calling in sick or you know, just sometimes I think everyone needs a mental health break. And, um, so I do think that that's going to come in, um, pretty soon that we're going to be utilizing that team more often. Um, we've also, um, been utilizing workers in other areas, so deploying people here to play people there. Um, we started a mental health first aid line for, um, the community, which, um, has been wonderful and lots of workers from all different areas are manning that phone. And so things like that just, um, you know, really been helpful.

Korina Barry ([04:52](#)):

And so that's a really great point. And are you all seeing more partnership and collaboration across programs and areas at this time?

Kim Clemenson ([05:02](#)):

Definitely, definitely. I think there's a lot of think tanks going on in the County and um, and that's really promising. I was on a call yesterday with the collaboratives and, um, some other nonprofits as well as law enforcement and the schools and everyone is really getting together to figure out what happens. Like if some parents get sick and you know, there's no place for their children, they don't have a family member here or how do we do all that without causing more harm or unintended consequences like placing a child in foster care for a reason like that, you know? Um, we are working really hard on finding, always finding family for children who are going to be displaced, you know, I'm not able to stay in their home, but at a time like this, it could be a spur of the moment problem and there's no one available. So I think things like that are happening all over the place and um, that's very, very helpful.

Korina Barry ([06:03](#)):

That's great. And are you seeing, um, like so related to the child welfare side of this work and knowing that our kids are out of schools right now, um, in speaking in Minnesota and we are under a stay at home order and kids are doing distance learning around the state and, and what we know about that around schools and teachers and personnel being mandated reporters and a lot of our reports often come from the schools and then we don't have those extra eyes on all of the kids during this time. And so there's all of those dynamics that are coming into play about, you know, supports for children and families. And so just wondering what that has looked like for you all so far. Like, are you seeing a decrease in reports? Are you seeing higher risk reports coming in, in response to stress with families right now?

Kim Clemenson ([06:56](#)):

At this, we've definitely seen a decrease, which is really typical as you mentioned, when school's not in session. Um, we are, we are asking workers to communicate with the families that they're currently working with, um, more often than they ever have. And we're available to provide basic needs and um, you know, services are continuing this way of video and, um, zoom for, um, any in home services that we can offer. That way we're continuing to try to keep some normalcy. But I think as time goes on, I, I don't think that we've even seen a tip of the iceberg as far as what's, how this is affecting families. This is very, very stressful and people are losing their jobs. And so it's financial, it's also just, um, support services. It's so much, and as I mentioned earlier, day by day we were changing things to meet whatever

comes up because we just don't really know what's gonna come up that day and the community is, um, rising up. And I think that we have a lot more, um, things to come in regards to the issues you just mentioned.

Korina Barry ([08:10](#)):

Yeah. What are some of your, you know, I'm sure there are many in this, again, we say over and over, there are so many unknowns, but I mean at this point, what are some of your biggest concerns? Maybe short term or longterm on the implications or impacts on, you know, child welfare and the way we do this work and the way we're able to meet the needs and support families in the coming weeks and months?

Kim Clemenson ([08:38](#)):

That's tricky. I think there's pros and cons to that. Like what I'm finding out is that, you know, I actually think right now we're, we are communicating more effectively and more often with families, which I think is a really, really good, um, outcome of everything. And I would like to see that continue. I am worried that we're not able to reach a lot of people who don't maybe know how to reach out to the community or us or anyone else to meet their needs. Um, so I am concerned about that, but I think that right now, as I mentioned, the think tanks, they're trying to get the message out in different, different ways. Like, whether it's, um, you know, via webinars or, um, a lot of email messages and a lot of things that, um, people are sending out as far as these are the resources. And like I said, our mental health crisis or first aid line is also a good place, um, for us to get word out on, you know, if people need anything. But it is worrisome. I mean, definitely because it's hard to reach people when everyone doesn't have a iPad either or even a smartphone. So, um, you know, it's worrisome, but like I said, every day something different happens and we, um, and the, the staff are amazing and they're rising to the occasion. So,

Korina Barry ([10:01](#)):

You know, I wonder too, knowing, um, many of the families who come in contact and become involved with the system may not have the resources needed to stay connected with, with workers and advocates and support folks. And the way that many of us are able to, like you said, via tablets and computers and smartphones. Um, are you seeing programs or has the state been able to support or have you all had any capacity of getting any of those bad equipment or supports to families?

Kim Clemenson ([10:33](#)):

Absolutely. There's been, um, a lot of grants that have been released. We've also had, um, here within Ramsey County there's been, um, you know, the offer of cell phones as well as minutes and all of that. But again, it's, um, it's who are we missing and how do we get that message out so we do have the supplies to offer, but it is about, um, connecting to the people that need them. That is the worry.

Korina Barry ([11:01](#)):

Yeah. Kind of getting on the radar of those folks. And in thinking about your staff across the many units that you, are, you support, are you seeing increased consultation time or even just a thing, just emotional support for each other and kind of keeping morale and well-being, protecting their, their own wellbeing and doing that work together?

Kim Clemenson ([11:27](#)):

I think it's about that. I think, um, as I said, the staff have been amazing and they've all just really come, come to work every day. And, and said basically what needs to be done. And there's so many things that they're doing that are not the same things they would do on a normal quote unquote normal day. Um, but I do think that summer nervous, you know, there's a lot of anxiety. There's fear of the unknown of course. And um, and I think that it's really important that there is some connection. Everyone's at home, about 90% of our workers are working remotely right now, which is really great. I'm really happy about that. But then there is the connectivity that is missing and especially in social work or social workers, right? So everyone likes to be together and talk to each other face to face. And I do think that that takes a toll on people. And I think even a daily email, you know, coming from your supervisor or your team or you know, that really helps and keeps people connected. Cause I, that is a real fear of mine as well.

Korina Barry ([12:34](#)):

And do you have mentioned earlier that you're just seeing, so you're seeing the community, you're seeing just so much support taking place. Can you share a little bit about some of the ways you're seeing community show up and, and also how community, how the public can support, um, the work you all are doing more moving forward?

Kim Clemenson ([12:58](#)):

Sure. The community has been amazing. Um, the volunteers are everywhere and people are stepping in to help deliver meals, to donate meals, to donate supplies, make homemade masks. Um, they, they've, you know, offered money, offered sanitizer, um, to the workers and you know, resources that we can use for families and, um, are constantly calling. Like, what can we do or how can we help? And, and it's, it's heartwarming. It's wonderful. Um, I wish we could utilize them more. I, um, it's difficult because if you're not delivering something or you know, offering something, um, in such as a supply or hand sanitizer or something, it's difficult because we can't send people out to homes. So, but people want to help and, and I just think it's amazing and, and I think that there's going to be a lot of good that comes from this afterwards as well. So, um, if you can think of anything that people can volunteer for, please let me know because it's, people are asking all the time. It's really wonderful.

Korina Barry ([14:09](#)):

Yeah. And we saw, um, I'm sure you saw it of course, to the KARE11 story kind of that actually highlighted, um, a couple of child protection workers and, um, kind of this issue around, uh, being frontline, being on the front lines often kind of being forgotten and, and, um, not recognized in that some workers in some agencies don't have access to proper safety equipment or support needed and they're still having to go out, you know, and, and kind of put themselves at, at harm and at risk, um, and their own families and their own communities. Um, and so I don't know how that feels, if that is impacting you all, if you feel like you have the essentials currently or, um, just around kind of being able to keep workers safe at this time.

Kim Clemenson ([15:06](#)):

I think that's been a struggle just like it has been for medical workers and everyone else. And when I mentioned before about the community stepping up, um, that's what's being donated. And, um, you know, making sure that workers have hand sanitizers that they can take with them. And the mask, as you know, has been, you know, we've gotten conflicting messages regarding masks, but just recently have ordered, um, a lot of them for workers. Um, the surgical mask, which I'm really thankful for. And, um, again, I've mentioned this a few times, but our first responder team, um, is really crucial because

that team, um, will hopefully have the supplies they need and we'll, um, you know, be able to do some of the work that others have anxiety around. So, um, and that could be because of their family members or themselves or you know, any compromised health condition or, you know, it could be a number of things. But, um, I think that, you know, we're trying to respect everyone's needs and, um, really support everyone and, um, do as much as we can.

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

Absolutely. And do you, are there any, are there ways that our state leadership or federal leadership, you know, any essential policy practice? You know, guidance that would be helpful and supportive for you all? Um, again, on the front lines trying to get out and stay in contact with families.

Kim Clemenson ([16:38](#)):

I, I think, um, the recent communication has been really helpful. We were really, um, you know, concerned about basic, um, meetings and hospitals and things like, hospitals weren't letting workers come through the door at all times. And, you know, we're, we need to see those children. And, and now, um, the latest communication was that if, uh, you know, a medical person or law enforcement has eyes on those children and can say that they're doing okay and they're in the hospital, et cetera, that, that you know, that the worker does not have to meet with that child face to face and then a video, um, a video meeting or a "video eyes" on per se, is appropriate. So I, I think, um, it's about prioritizing need and cases and, um, you know, the balancing act of what families need and how to keep workers safe. And I, and I think it's hard, but it, it's, it can be done and we're doing it the best we can, but when another professional is available and, and can, um, and is already working with a child or a caregiver, then that duplication is not necessary. So I was really pleased to see that come out. And I think, um, you know, I, I think DHS and, um, you know, the, the federal government are working on all those priorities and, and that's helpful to us. But I also don't want us to, um, miss things. And so I guess that's my worry. As we talked about earlier, we still have to, for the most part, you know, meet families face to face on an investigation.

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

And I know you mentioned, um, earlier on about how you are connecting in and getting support like as a leader. Um, and, and you mentioned a travel for collaborative and I'm just wondering if you all been able to kind of rally around and support each other as agencies, you know, County or community in different ways and kind of talking through what this is looking like in different, right. Like, you know, I know we have a Minnesota counties and out-state rural areas. We have our urban more suburban. And so they're obviously different needs and um, supports available in different communities. But wondering if that, if you all have been able to connect more and if that has been, uh, you know, some kind of helpful process and kind of like, this is what we're, we're navigating and doing within our agency and this is working or these are the kinds of gaps and barriers we're running into. And

Kim Clemenson ([19:15](#)):

Absolutely, the Metro manager director group is, um, meets regularly and, um, there've been a lot of, um, there've been a, there's been a lot of email communication, um, amongst that group and, um, talking about how are you handling this, how are you handling this? And a lot of sharing of information, which has been really great. Um, also Casey Family and some other groups are, um, hosting webinars as well and sharing information from different jurisdictions across the country. So, um, you know, I know like New York obviously as suffered a lot and they have a lot to share and, um, you know, Washington,

all of those, um, jurisdictions that have already gotten through this, um, are really willing to, um, talk about that and, and share that information. And those calls are happening quite frequently, like, um, every couple of weeks or so. So that's been really helpful for me.

Korina Barry ([20:15](#)):

That's good. It really is good to see how folks are able to both locally, nationally, you know, around the world in some ways kind of connect and try to navigate this together and kind of those lessons learned and in ways to move forward in the best way possible. Right. So in seeing and hearing all the ways day to day practice is shifting and changing and adapt and adapting to all of the change taking place right now. Do you this work changing long-term or just any way that this work might look different after all of this?

Kim Clemenson ([20:54](#)):

I do and I hope some of it does stick. I think, um, as I mentioned, workers have a lot more, um, connection with the families that they're working with. They're checking in, they're doing a lot more of that than we have done in the past. I also think, um, there are ways to do assessments and you know, things that aren't so intrusive for families that, um, that we could continue doing. And, um, and I feel that, um, that a lot of the, like I said, the connectivity is really beneficial for families and, and workers as well. So I hope, um, I don't want to see face to face go by the wayside by any, you know, by any stretch of the imagination. But I think that, um, the addition of all of this technological, um, connection would be really great for people. So an add on, I guess

Korina Barry ([21:55](#)):

I wonder, you know, one thing I'm just thinking of right now too, as someone who previously worked in direct practice in child welfare and all of the, you know, and not in a pandemic, um, you know, high case loads and you know, lots of children and families to see and documentation, documentation, documentation, things that take you away from that time with those families. I just wonder if you see any of that, you know, or have any hope in how that some of that may or may not change coming out of this. I don't know what, you know, how documentation, if it's changing at all currently and you know, our workers are given more of that time to shift and connect with families, you know, via zoom and in different ways at this time and less of that, you know, of course it's still important to document and, and, and have some of those, that essential information. But just knowing, just knowing how we work or sometimes don't have enough of that time to be able to, that they would like to spend with families and kind of navigating and supporting them. And so just wondering if you have any thoughts of if any of that might look different in the future?

Kim Clemenson ([23:04](#)):

I think it might. The other thing, um, that we're seeing right now is people helping people. So workers are joining together to, um, you know, work with families. So there isn't, um, as much duplication as we've seen in the past. And, and what that's leading to is more specialized kind of caseloads and, and sharing of work, which, um, to your point would mean that everyone could spend time with the family. Um, not excessively, but, um, spend time with the family and then, um, sharing that burden of the documentation because I hear you and I think it's really important that we're using time wisely and meeting people's needs. Um, so that's what I've seen also just recently is how workers are sharing the, um, sharing that. Um, I guess, what would you call that, the load or whatever. Um, and really working together. So, um, I would like that to continue as well. Back to your last question, um, because I really think that that would have a really good impact on families and um, right now when all of the workers

aren't doing face to face visits, um, the documentation has definitely decreased cause they're still documenting if they're talking to a person or um, sharing a zoom meeting or something. But definitely, um, the travel time and you know, all of that, um, really is taken away and they have a lot more time to, you know, document what they are really doing.

Korina Barry ([24:40](#)):

Yeah. We've talked a lot in this time we've been chatting about challenges and worries and potential changes and all of those things and I'm just wondering what is leaving you with hope and what you feel hopeful about kind of moving forward?

Kim Clemenson ([24:58](#)):

I, I feel hopeful, um, about all of the togetherness that this pandemic has brought to us. I think that people are helping each other. People are supporting each other. There's so much more, um, communication in regards to how are you, what can I do for you? All of that. I, I think there is just a renewed sense in teamwork and, um, just really people supporting each other and that goes across departments. I mean, I've seen that coming from every which way and, um, and people are talking about it all the time. And, and I do think that, um, this is a hard time and everyone's feeling it and everyone's feeling anxiety. But I really think that, um, we're better together and I think that people are helping each other. And I know we'll all get through this together.

Korina Barry ([25:53](#)):

Yeah. And you know, I can't believe I haven't mentioned this yet cause it just, you just made me think of that is that everyone is seeing, at least in the child welfare world, the, the video that the Ramsey County, the County attorney's made for the child protection workers. And that was so sweet. And you know, in my social media timeline, I have lots of frontline child protection workers and, and folks working in child welfare in different capacities, you know, kinship longterm foster care who are just sharing it and sharing that YouTube video, um, recognizing frontline professionals in child welfare that are, you know, doing really tough work in, in tough times and just, you know, in this often thankless field and work it, just seeing how special that was to people.

Kim Clemenson ([26:45](#)):

That was special. Yes. Yes. That was so impactful. That was amazing. And that too shows, you know, the teamwork and how people are coming together. So that was amazing.

Korina Barry ([26:58](#)):

Yeah, we need more of that. Well, thank you Kim so much for joining me and taking time out of your very busy schedule and kind of a very hectic time right now and being willing to share with me and our listeners just kind of what this has looked like for you all and the important work that you're doing to kind of continue to serve and support our families in Minnesota. And I'm just really thankful for your time and for sharing your perspective today. Thank you and thank you for having me and thank you for all you do.

Kim Clemenson ([27:34](#)):

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