

Liz Snyder ([00:06](#)):

Hi, I'm Liz Snyder. I'm the co-director of the Minnesota Child Welfare Training Academy, and I'm here with Rick and Nancy from New Jersey, The Department of Children and Families. As we continue to learn more about worker wellness and explore promising practices and models to sustain our workforce, we're always interested in hearing what other states might be up to. Today we're gonna hear about an initiative out of New Jersey to support child welfare workers, including the development of an Office of Staff and Wellness, as well as innovative curriculum development to strengthen the workforce and in turn, better serve children and families. Welcome, Nancy and Rick, could you two introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your role?

Nancy Carre-Lee ([00:53](#)):

Sure. My name is Nancy Kare Lee. I am the Executive Director of the Office of Staff Health and Wellness. And I often like to say that the name speaks for itself, right? So we are in charge of the wellbeing of our 6,600 employees at Department of Children and Families. Rick?

Rick Pina ([01:16](#)):

Oh, good morning, Liz. How are you today? And thank you for having us. My name is Rick Pina. I'm currently the supervisor of Safety and Security Operations for the Department of Children's and Families. I guess in my former life 27, spent 27 years with the New Jersey State Police, was the Executive Field Operations Officer and now in part of the great team under the Department of Children's and Families. So thank you again for having us.

Liz Snyder ([01:46](#)):

Yeah, thanks for being here. I'm really looking forward to learning about what you all are doing in New Jersey. By way of doing that. Let's start by talking a little bit about the Office of Staff Health and Wellness that your state set up within the Department of Children and Families. As I understand it, the office's purpose is to engage staff in resources and support that foster overall physical and emotional wellbeing, strong morale, and a culture of inclusivity and empowerment. Can you tell us more about how this Office of Staff Health and Wellness came to be?

Nancy Carre-Lee ([02:22](#)):

I sure can. So beginning in, I guess I would say 2018, our commissioner has hosted a series of listening tours with families served by our system. She also spoke with contracted service providers, and in this case with our own staff from throughout our department. So she had the opportunity to hear from people connected to our system, what they felt they needed from our system for staff support. And honestly, there was a resounding theme and we recognized that there were a need for more structured and organized avenue where staff can get some concrete supports. And so the broad goal of the Office of Staff Health and Wellness was determined to be one of the department's transformational goals in our strategic plan. And the Office of Staff Health and Wellness was, again, like you said, Liz was created to improve the health, safety, and wellbeing of all of our staff. And that was created through the listening sessions that were conducted by our commissioner. So our purpose really is to engage staff and resources and supports that foster overall physical, emotional wellbeing, strong morale, because we know that our staff's professional and personal wellness is critical to fostering a physically and emotionally safe environment. And it really also helps us to ensure that we have a productive workforce.

Liz Snyder ([04:07](#)):

Amazing. I often you know so often in child welfare we talk about self care and it becomes so much the responsibility of an individual and this office seems like an organizational response to support wellness as opposed to just an individual's response.

Nancy Carre-Lee (04:25):

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Your're spot on.

Liz Snyder (04:29):

Very cool. For several years now it sounds like New Jersey has taken several steps to prioritize the health and safety of staff and has made great progress in creating and implementing those initiatives from monthly groups to providing toolkits and improving training. Can you share some of these for our audience?

Nancy Carre-Lee (04:51):

So we have a lot of different initiatives that we have implemented here in the state of New Jersey and one of the areas for us in our office at Staff Health and Wellness is really around support. So for us, it goes beyond the activities, but really focusing on how to have sustainable practice where people feel safe in their environment because the activities pretty much are one off activities. So they may be great for the moment, but the long lasting effect is what we're looking to create a culture of inclusivity, a culture where people feel safe, a culture where people feel respected and heard. And so a couple of years ago, and I'll have to pin this off to you, Rick, because I think one of the critical roles that we've established in the agency was the creation of the security advisors. And so I think I wanna pass it off to you to talk about that a little bit before we talk about some of the other things that we've done here in the state.

Rick Pina (05:59):

Absolutely, thank you, Nancy. Well actually, our operations was created about seven years ago and it was developed just to ensure that the case workers or our employees were being provided the best case practices dealing with safety and security in and out of the offices. And it played an integral part with ensuring that we mitigate situations of critical incidents, whether it be in the building itself, the physical structure of the building, looking at that the wellbeing of the case worker as they went out into the field to do their work and working with local and state officials to ensure that they were provided that safety. It evolved and continued to grow. The administration felt very strong about our goals and objectives when it came to safety and security of our staff. And we evolved into creating nine additional positions for safety and security advisors and the safety and security advisors were made up of federal, former federal agents state law enforcement, local law enforcement, and county law enforcement, all former law enforcement backgrounds.

(07:23):

And so what we did was provide I guess a safety net for advice and again, best case practices. So we continue to evolve time and time and time again to do not only safety projects, but threat assessments, looking into intelligence based operations and finally coming down to it over the last two years, working closely with its wellness program. And now we see a new creation here, a new way of practicing the procedures on the overall safety of our employees. And it's been very welcoming, at least to our group and to law enforcement to deal with those now the wellness portion of the safety needs of our employees.

Nancy Carre-Lee ([08:11](#)):

And so some of the things in addition to the safety and security advisors, we've been very intentional about doing things on a monthly basis that staff can participate in the workplace. And so it's important for us to be able to give them some time to tap out of their busy days if they want to do breath work, if they want to do some chair exercises. We have put together monthly calendar that goes out every month. It's called DCF Connect. these are a host of activities that are facilitated for us by us. So these are existing staff who already have special skills and talents that they are wanting and agreeing to share with other staff. And so if someone's a Pilate instructor, for instance, outside of the workplace or they do mindful activities, then those same individuals are taking time out of their busy days to facilitate these special activities for the existing staff.

([09:20](#)):

Those occur on a weekly basis. We also implemented what we're calling a DCF Real Talk. And so this is where we, It's like this, it's a podcast where we have internal staff come and talk about what some of their struggles are in the workplace. So maybe they're newly divorced or something, and now they're a single parent and they're trying to manage the personal and the day to day demands of the workplace. And so we kind of use this opportunity to hear the themes around what our staff are struggling with so that we can put the proper interventions in place for them.

Liz Snyder ([10:00](#)):

It's so interesting to me the connection that you all have made in this journey between worker safety and overall wellness and how safety is just a component of overall wellness and that people get to be whole people, whatever's happening in their personal life, that has to be part of their work life because it's sort of an artificial definition between the two when we try to do that. So Interesting. And how have workers responded to the office and the work and the monthly calendars and the work you're doing? Rick?

Rick Pina ([10:38](#)):

I think it's new. I think it's for us to continue to promote at all levels and it, it's to sit back and wait I think there's a couple things that can, we can feed off of. First of all, it's a learning process against for law enforcement, and I say law enforcement because wellness is a practice that happens 24 7. And it's important that our administration and I think know that they've realized this. And we try to instill, and I try to instill that into the law enforcement. It just doesn't end nine to five. We have to realize that it continues after five o'clock, and this administration has supported those things, realizing that it just doesn't stop at five o'clock. We realize that that support continues after. So we adapt to that and try to engage law enforcement when needed to give that support and engage our case workers or our employees that we're there to support them beyond the scope of the work hours <affirmative>. And I think that's the part where we're continuing to educate, we're continuing to sell, send out that message. It's a trust factor, and I think this administration's done a great job at it, but we have to continue to sell that product so that you develop that trust amongst employees throughout the department.

Nancy Carre-Lee ([12:15](#)):

And I'll add that, I think we also wanna always be mindful of what we are trying to accomplish. And so we know that sometimes staff are not gonna take time out of their workday to focus on self care even when they need it. So our focus needs to be on the culture of the work environment and making sure that the actual office space feels comfortable and safe and that our folks, they feel that they're seen and

heard and respected. And we wanna focus on really supporting and sustaining a healing culture. Because like I said before, we know that an occasional wellness event is nice, but the impact of that is usually just for the moment. So what lasts is when you have a culture of safety for staff where you work, environment feels safe. And so Rick and I, our offices, we will continue to evaluate, assess, and work towards developing long term plans to accomplish these goals while offering some wellness information and safety information and activities to our staff just to keep that focus alive.

Liz Snyder ([13:32](#)):

I'm very impressed and excited and have a million directions I want to go because I think this is so exciting and cool. <laugh> I do, want to also comment that I think this is an incredible parallel process for what we're hoping our workforce and our systems are creating for kids and families, which has been one of the challenges of this system. I'm using air quotes on a podcast, but the care and compassion and understanding of whole people with our workforce and what we hope our workforce is creating for kids and families,

Nancy Carre-Lee ([14:12](#)):

That's everything. I mean, I think that's such a good point. And I think if you would've asked me that 20 years ago, I might have had a different answer because I think we've learned so much over the course of the past couple of years, and especially when you do the work of protection, you are going out there, your main goal is safety and to make sure that kids and families are safe and that you're doing your very best to accomplish those goals. But we never really talked or even trained people about their own self care, their own safety. We just expect you to come to work and here's your caseload and go save all of the kids in the families and go be so instrumental in their lives that you make an impact on their lives. But we historically don't necessarily start off with your own self, your own being and making sure that individuals feel safe, healthy, and connected.

([15:25](#)):

Because once you feel that for yourself, then you could be everything to everyone else. And I think that's such an important point that you raise in that if we take care of our workforce in the way that we are talking about here and we're intentional about it, then that's all they're going to know. And they'll be that much better for those that they're responsible for ensuring their safety. Right. So it's almost like walking the walk and not just talking the talk. Right. Because if I feel respected, then I'm gonna respect the families that I work with or that I serve. If I feel safe, I'm gonna do my best to make sure that they feel safe, Right? Because that's what I know. I don't know Rick, would you add anything to that?

Rick Pina ([16:12](#)):

No, no. I completely agree. We had this discussion a couple days ago, Nancy, when we were discussing, listen, if I'm gonna help others, I gotta make sure that I'm healthy first. If my health and my wellbeing has to be first, my family has to be first before I go out and help others. So we have to ensure that our wellbeing is taken care of. And I think what we also spoke about a little bit the other day is that we have to realize that our staff may be confronting their own personal stress <affirmative> issues, and as they're an engaging into other individuals, I think we found that out through our conversation. So it's very important is to recognize almost a stillness first.

([17:00](#)):

In our families and ourselves before we can actually go out and help the public in general, help the community in general. And I think like I said, I think your staff is doing a tremendous job. I think the

administration is moving directly towards that engagement. And actually it's a breath of fresh air for me, coming from my former position with law enforcement and now into this because you have a totally different perspective on how important wellness is. Yeah, it's first and foremost,

Nancy Carre-Lee ([17:38](#)):

And that's deep <laugh>. That is deep. And I like that you say that, but the piece of that is given permission, if we cultivate this environment that this is just a regular part of the workday and part of that includes your wellbeing, then you're giving people permission because sometimes they don't think they have permission to be well for some reason. Right.

Rick Pina ([18:04](#)):

Great point.

Liz Snyder ([18:05](#)):

I think that's true,

Rick Pina ([18:06](#)):

<affirmative>. Yep, great point. I think we also meant, we mentioned this, Nancy, I think you said this to me the other day. We speak it, but we gotta own it. We've gotta own it. We gotta go out and own it now and pass that message. And I think the message is being delivered. I think it's moving in that direction.

Liz Snyder ([18:27](#)):

The other part of that that I think is so critical is, I'm just willing to bet New Jersey isn't that different from Minnesota in terms of public perception of child protection, the general public's understanding of our work, of our role, of our ability within our roles. And I think that there is a toll that misunderstanding or the shame and blame that might come to our workers also takes a toll. And building a culture of deep respect, like you're talking about in the office, sounds like a place to also insulate and support people and hold up their role in their job. You're deserving of wellness because you're doing important work

Rick Pina ([19:14](#)):

<affirmative>. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Nancy Carre-Lee ([19:16](#)):

Very well said. That's right.

Rick Pina ([19:17](#)):

Yep.

Liz Snyder ([19:19](#)):

Okay. This has been very exciting. I'm thinking about our listeners who are largely child protection, child welfare professionals in Minnesota and around the country. And I wonder if there are other examples from your work that you would wanna share with those folks that you think have been particularly exciting?

Nancy Carre-Lee ([19:41](#)):

I can say that we have a host of conversations with staff that we convene on a monthly basis most times. And Rick and I are part of a monthly convening with our safety staff in the offices. So what we've done is we've identified at least one or two staff within each of our offices that serve as safety liaisons. And we convene them once a month to talk about some of their concerns around environmental safety or even psychological safety so that we can put some systems in place to help them. So sometimes they come and they talk to us about office space and their physical environment, but sometimes there's a piece of policy that we need to take a look at that might not be working that we need to maybe provide clarification or maybe it needs to be revised, but this gives them the forum or the floor to really talk about those common and reoccurring themes that they're seeing.

([20:48](#)):

May it be in the office or in the field so that we can work on it. I think when Rick talks about this, he likes to say that when we first started having these meetings, I would have to agree they were really like a gripe session and people would come in and complain about everything that was not working. And we saw that culture shift rather quickly. I would say, Rick, wouldn't you agree that individuals started to be more proactive? They started to really want to be mindful that it's not about the negativity, it's about owning your own safety and it's about taking charge of it. If you see something, then what are you going to do about it to help change or mitigate those issues, <affirmative>? And so we saw a lot of our staff take their own ownership. We saw people going out into field to talk to law enforcement, to talk to schools, just to educate around some of these issues that we've had. And so it was also an opportunity for us to share ideas with one another from office to office. And the beauty of it is they were talking to individuals from the central office who had the ability to make some changes where staff were really struggling. I don't know, Rick, do you wanna add anything to that?

Rick Pina ([22:11](#)):

No, I think once again, you nailed it. And it was, it's basically empowering. You're empowering I call it the military calls, it boots on the ground. The people that actually are doing the work with the ability to come in and talking to management about situation, forming a trust. Nothing more important than wellbeing is the trust factor. If you have trust in who you surround yourself with, who you work with every day, you're gonna feel well about yourself and you're gonna trust them with not only the issues that make up of work, but also the social issues that are made up and the values that are shared in an office and explaining themselves. So I think what we've been able to do again, is once again, open up the committee, not only to address the safety and security aspect of it, but to create an openness to talk about the wellness portion of it, where Nancy's staff comes in and dedicates the next 20 or 30 minutes in those committee meetings to discuss about this wellness issue. So another avenue to explore, another avenue to learn, another avenue to grow.

Nancy Carre-Lee ([23:33](#)):

And I would also say that we've learned a lot about the importance of being fully present for our staff, and that obviously includes promoting their health and their safety. So what I would say to child welfare leadership nationally is that you need to practice what you preach because that's what we've been trying to do. We all care about our workforce and their needs, but for them, the way we should show that we care about them is listening to them. We have to be respectful of their needs and we have to be genuine because they know when we're faking it. So one example for us is we encourage staff to take their lunch and their breaks. That's so simple. That's so textbooked, right. But we shouldn't be scheduling meetings during those times, right? Because those are the staff's protected time. Sometimes

a simple good morning to staff goes a long way. So make sure your supervision meetings, for instance, or your conferences with your staff, begin with a simple temperature check. How are you doing? And don't be afraid about the response. In my supervision, my supervisor is the commissioner, and I'm reminded of that often. When we start supervision, she's like, How you doing? And I'm like, Oh, I did this, I did that. She's like, Wait, wait. The question is how are you doing?

Liz Snyder ([25:07](#)):

oind?Not, What are you doing?

Nancy Carre-Lee ([25:07](#)):

So, right, exactly. And really practicing what you preach. If you say you care, then you have to demonstrate it because talk is cheap. Not everyone has the resources to build an office of staff Health and wellness. We were able to in New Jersey, but little steps to show staff that we're invested in their wellbeing. That goes a long way.

Liz Snyder ([25:34](#)):

So good and interesting. Nancy, I actually thought that where you were gonna go was talking about how in your role you have to also practice what you preach in terms of your own health and wellness. And I think the beauty of that is we all get to see the challenge of allowing ourselves, of valuing ourselves enough to be able to take that space.

Nancy Carre-Lee ([25:58](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Liz Snyder ([26:01](#)):

It has been great getting to hear about your programs and learning more about what's happening in New Jersey. I wonder if either of you have any final words or thoughts you would wanna share with child protection professionals?

Nancy Carre-Lee ([26:16](#)):

I would say, and I think I said this just be intentional about everything that you do. I don't think you'll get anyone who says, We don't care about our workforce. I think all of us care about the wellbeing of our workforce. And as I said before, we may not necessarily have the monetary resources to kind of build an office <affirmative>, but sometimes it's just the little things you do that makes the world of a difference. And understanding that everyone is different and unique within their own right So how I supervise you, Liz, may be different than how I supervise Rick or vice versa. My needs may be very different. And taping into those needs and understanding the whole person first before we make judgements about, well, they're not doing their work well, could there be a barrier to that? And just meeting people where they are really

Liz Snyder ([27:21](#)):

Beautiful. Wow. What about you, Rick?

Rick Pina ([27:24](#)):

Yeah, boy, that's tough to top. I mean, <laugh>, Nancy,

Nancy Carre-Lee ([27:30](#)):

You top it all the time, Rick.

Rick Pina ([27:31](#)):

You said it all, but just I guess putting it just right out there. Administration's done a wonderful job with providing services, whether it be alert systems or enhancing an office or hopefully moving to the direction of new cars or whatever. Those are all material things that help the safety and security. But the step that we're taking now, and Nancy, what Nancy's doing in the commissioner doing now are taking a step to what are they gonna take from us? What is the staff gonna take from us? And that step is compassion, listening and acting on those things. So I think those three lessons right there are in a nutshell. It's always easy. You know what we give somebody, but what they take from us is far greater and oh, hopefully they'll,

Nancy Carre-Lee ([28:30](#)):

See, I knew you would top it <laugh>.

Liz Snyder ([28:33](#)):

It was so wonderful to talk to both of you, to get to know you a little bit and to hear about all of the very cool work that's happening in New Jersey. Thank you so much for being here. We really appreciate it.

Rick Pina ([28:45](#)):

Thank you, Liz.

Nancy Carre-Lee ([28:46](#)):

It's our pleasure. Thank you.

Speaker 4 ([28:49](#)):

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