

June Family Reunification Month TA Call

Anna Pilato:

Hello everyone and welcome to the call. This is Anna Pilato, I'm Deputy Secretary with the Department for Children and Families, over Strategic Development and Faith-based and Community Initiatives. We are so happy that you're able to join us this afternoon. We are having this call today, June is Family Reunification Month, and this is of course the teleconference celebrating this month. We just think it is a great time to pause and focus on family reunification, how important that is. The purpose of this teleconference is to inform and educate on the subject of family reunification, and also to inspire and equip community members with what they need to make an impact on families in child welfare, by supporting this very important effort. Thanks so much for joining us again on this call and also it's part of the heart of our mission, our team has put together this group of speakers today that you're going to be hearing from, and Amy Kahler who is part of the Faith-based and community initiatives team is here to introduce and as well as facilitate the call. So I want to thank you again so much, for taking some time out of your day, and I'd like to introduce Amy.

Amy Kahler:

Thank you Anna, alright well thanks to everybody who helped out in putting this together today, everyone from DCF to Children's Alliance, to KVC to Saint Francis, and we just thank everyone. We also have joining us, Deputy Secretary Kathe Decker, and Brian Dempsey is going to begin for us. He is director of Prevention and Protective Services. So take it away Brian.

Brian Dempsey:

Thank you Amy, good afternoon everybody and welcome to the call. We're here to talk about reunification month. Reunification is the process of returning a child who has been in out of home care, to the care of his or her parent. Before a child is removed and placed in out of home care though. The agency becomes involved, and I just want to touch about, what we are about, and what the public policy of the state is. And that's about the safety of our children, and making sure that they can stay home safely. And it's only when we determine that they're unsafe, that we work with stakeholders, such as

the courts or law enforcement, or both to request the removal of children. When they're removed they're placed in as much of a family like setting as possible, and that's either with a foster parent or with a relative or a kin placement. Our placement rate is approximately 94% in a family like setting. I say that because I think that it's important to note that when children unfortunately are removed do to safety reasons, to keep them in a family like setting, even though they experience trauma from being removed, helps assure that they're in a setting that they're comfortable with. It also allows foster parents when it is feasible to do so, or relatives to work with the biological parents either to mentor and provide support or to help with the reunification process.

The goal of reunification, when a child is removed, unless the court rules otherwise, the goal is to reunite the child with the parents. The court is to find if there is no viable option other than, or to not reunite the child into their home. The reunification process is done through a couple of processes, and some of the other speakers will talk more about details of what they offer, but it's done through case planning. That's an opportunity for the family, for their support systems, for advocates, for relatives and anybody that knows the child and is involved in the child's life. Including education or other connections the child has. To get around the table and to work together, and to come up with a case plan to help that child reunify with his or her parents. It's a holistic approach, and the target is to really address the removal reasons, that caused the removal, but also to look at the family. One of the goals is to strengthen families. So that once the child is reunified we don't have further involvement with that family. So case plans will also look at the entire family system, the supports, and what the need is, not only to get the child home, but to make sure the family is strong and moving forward. Our child welfare case management providers provide these services to reunify the child in as fast a time as possible. I mentioned trauma earlier, but moving a child from home, even though the child was unsafe, is a traumatic experience for the child, and we'll talk about our data later, about how we reunify kids, but to minimize that trauma and return that child to the family when it is safe to do so is the best outcome.

The Kansas child in Need of Care code or the CINC code is what you'll often hear referred to provides notice requirements before we move children home. We don't work in a vacuum. The child welfare system includes the court as an overseer and decision maker once the child's been removed in a child in need of care case. The state through the county attorney represents the state in prosecuting the case the children have an attorney, the guardian ad litem, the parents have an attorney, grandparents are parties, many jurisdictions have court appointed special advocates or CASA's, some jurisdictions utilize court services officers to participate in the case as well. So there are a lot of eyes on these cases looking at the children. So when our providers get to a point that they feel it is safe to move a child home they will provide notice not only to the court, but to all the parties. Then that's an opportunity if there is some concern or

questions, the court can have a hearing, and until that hearing occurs the child will remain in their current placement. Then the hearing is an opportunity for everybody to voice their concerns or present evidence and the court can make an informed decision on the safety of that child, whether it is to reunify them back with the parent at that time, or if we just need to work with the family a little bit longer to insure the child's safety.

Some of the data surrounding reunification, I'm not going to read it, but you can see we're pretty successful. The last data poll through April 30th of this fiscal year we reunified 60% of our children, and that fluctuates between about sixty and sixty five percent, so most of our children are returned to their parents in Kansas. The other thing, I'll skip the middle two, the federal outcomes that we look at with our providers, one of them is how fast do we get children home, and I mentioned that at the beginning. For those children that we reunify with their parents, on average it is an eight month out of home stay. So as you can see it's a lot of work in a short period of time to strengthen the family so that the child or children are safe to return home.

Amy Kahler:

Okay, thank you Brian. Alright, next we have Marcy Scott who is the director of Intensive in Home Services for KVC, and she will share with us what service providers have available for families in Kansas.

Marcy Scott:

Thanks for having me here today. I'm from KVC and I'll be sharing what Saint Francis and KVC do to help support the reunification process. As you can see there's the state map. Kansas is privatized and there are four regions that the state is broken down into. KVC covers the Kansas City region, and you can see the counties that are in that region, and the East region. Saint Francis covers the West region, and the Wichita region.

When it has been determined that out of home placement is appropriate for a child, they're referred to KVC and Saint Francis for foster care services. We meet with the families right away and we start doing assessments. We do an initial assessment, and then we do ongoing assessments though out the case. We use assessments so we can help determine what the needs of the family are. So that we can identify those problem areas, and then work with the family to support them so that reunification can be possible. I know Brian talked about this a little bit, but as part of the assessment piece we talk to the family and find out who their relatives are, who's the grandparents, who's

the aunts and the cousins. Our preference is to place the children when they do come out of home with a relative, and we do that through different searches, by asking the family or sometimes we utilize different search engines over the internet. We utilize relatives because it can be less traumatizing for the children, and relatives also help support the biological family pretty good. Each family is provided a team of service providers that help and support them through the reunification process.

I want to talk about some of the services that we provide. Case management, that's usually the point of contact, and the case manager, is usually a licensed worker and they help connect the family with services, and identify paths that they maybe need to work on, and they help them throughout that process. Both agencies have in home family therapy programs. Sometimes in home family therapy is needed to help the family with communication, helping them with their child's behavior, whatever the need is, an in home family therapist can be provided to those families as an additional support. We try to use child behavior management training. Both agencies are involved in the KIPP program, which is the Kansas Intensive Permanency project, and that's a pretty interactive modality where we're teaching parents how to parent their children, and it's been very successful and helped aid in timely permanency.

Both agencies are big advocates for the families as we help provide support. There are several hearings throughout the case and the case management team will prepare written documentation so that the court can see the progress that's made on the case, and then can make recommendations if reunification is appropriate. We also attend school meetings to help advocate for services for children, or to help that parent be a voice at their children's school.

Transportation is provided, not all times are we able to keep the child in their home town. So we do offer transportation, so that we can promote regular contact with the biological families, and regular contact in turn, turns into timely reunification. Once children are returned home, services do not end. They are provided with twelve months of after care, and with that service they have a contact. It can be an in home therapy model, it could be additional case management services, crisis case management, whatever are the family's needs, are provided during that twelve month period. So that we can insure that they're not coming in and out of the system.

We also utilize community supports, Health Care providers, the doctors, and the community health department. Mental health is a big community partner, and they help us access services such as individual therapy or psychosocial group, also mental health for parents. We tap into those resources as well to help with anything, or any problem areas that they might have in that area. We utilize individuals or mental health centers in the community to provide medication management for children of parents to aid in reunification.

Then substance abuse is another partner that we use in the community to help address parents with children that might have those types of issues. Then there's lots of parenting classes in the community, and sometimes that's an identified need for the family so we'll help them find an agency or a group that's ongoing in their community that they can use for that resource. We work closely with the schools and sometimes we utilize churches for support. We have a lot of information and additional resources on our website. So I wanted to make sure everyone had that information, and both KVC and Saint Francis are provided on the slide for you guys. Thank you.

Anna Pilato:

Thanks so much Marcy. That was extremely informative and very helpful. Next I would like to introduce Amy Hagen, she's director of training for Children's Alliance of Kansas. Take it Amy.

Amy Hagen:

Thank you Anna, as Anna said I'm with the Children's Alliance of Kansas, and the alliance is an association of child welfare agencies, and you can see on the slide some of the services that we provide for our members, but what I want to focus on today is the role of foster parents in helping children reunify and return back home to their families. Particularly I want to focus on our comprehensive training that's provided in the MAPP program.

In order to become a foster parent in the state of Kansas, individuals need to participate in one of the MAPP programs. Primarily it's the first one that's listed, Trauma Informed MAPP, which we also call TIPS-MAPP, which is a 30-hour, 10-week group process that prepares families and individuals to be prepared and make the informed decision on becoming a foster/adoptive parent. We also have the PS-Deciding Together which is a companion program that allows for families to still become a foster parent if they're not able participate in a group session based on their schedules, or particularly in rural areas.

At this time what I want to do is highlight just those top two. I'm going to talk about TIPS-MAPP or the MAPP program specifically, because the deciding together program pulls that out. As part of this webinar you have the option to download handouts, and in the top right hand corner there is an icon that looks like a couple of very small pieces of paper, and if you click on that there are two handouts, one that's going to talk about

TIPS-MAPP and one that's going to talk about Caring for Our Own. What I've done in that is just highlight the areas that are specific to reunification within that program.

We start the process of helping foster parents understand their role in working with both families, and the goal to have children go back home from the very beginning. If you noticed this can be a tough concept sometimes for people to understand or see when they're working with children who have for some reason, primarily due to abuse or neglect have been removed from the home, and that is a new concept to begin thinking about those children going back home, and my role in working with them. So we start small in the very first meeting, and then build upon that as the meetings go on. One of the ways that we start is just even talking about what TIPS-MAPP stands for, it's a huge acronym, very large. As Brian mentioned earlier, the impact of the trauma that occurs when a child is removed from the home, and so that is where the T, I, comes from, and the fact that the program is recently updated to talk about the Trauma Impact. Then next is Partnering for Safety and Permanence. The word partnering comes up throughout our meetings, and by partnering we need for foster families to work with birth families, to work with the court system, DCF, KVC, Saint Francis, just this wide community that helps support children and families.

The second meeting is where we do what's called the alliance model. The alliance model really focuses on the role of foster parents, connecting children to their birth families. It is a very interactive visual activity that shows the old model that used to be utilized in child welfare. Where everybody was surrounding the child and supporting, and trying to meet the child's needs, and kind of leaving parents on their own to try and figure it out, and try to do the things that they need to do to have their children return. In the Alliance model we re-sculpt and we reposition the people involved and show that foster parent, we have them connect the child with their birth family, and they work together by mentoring, modeling, and helping to support the case plan goal that's been set by the court system, and through the contract agency. As I said it continues to build on from there, in meeting three we talk about grief and loss, and really the impact of trauma, and not only the impact of trauma on the children, but the fact that parents also are experiencing trauma by having their children removed and the more I can understand that it can relate back to the behavior of the child and the parent, and how I can be able to meet their needs. Meeting four, first we talk about building attachments and the importance of the birth family connection, and building upon that, and meeting six is really where this starts to come together, and the title of that meeting is "Helping Children with Birth Family Connections" and the role is what does a foster parent do to help develop those connections, to help support the child in the reunification back home. Then there are further meetings that go on from the ten weeks, and then a handout that describes those.

The other program that we have that is just getting started is Caring for Our Own. Caring for Our Own is a 27 hour 9 week group process, and it's designed to help relative and kinship providers understand their role in supporting families and children placed in their home. Brian mentioned earlier that a lot of children are placed with relatives or kinship providers, and Caring for Our Own is more of a support group and it allows families to understand their role in being able to help achieve permanency more quickly, and be able to work with birth parents because of their unique relationship that they have as family, to be able to be a model and a support in that goal of children returning home. The last slide just has our contact information; Bruce Linhos is our executive director. Specifically for MAPP, Denise Gibson is our Director of National Programs, because that program as it is also outside of Kansas, and then I coordinate the MAPP program here in Kansas, and there is our website and our phone number if you have any additional questions for us. Thank you.

Amy Kahler:

Thank you so much Amy. Alright next we are going to have Sherry Tomlinson. She has served as a family engagement consultant for the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. She's currently a member of the KC family programs first parent advisory council, and she serves as vice president and director for KFAN, Kansas Family Advisory Network. She is also a birth mom who has her own reunification story, and we will hear from her now. Sherry are you there?

Sherry Tomlinson:

I am. First I want to talk to you about what the Kansas Family Advisory Network is. As you can see from the slide, we call ourselves KFAN for short and we are a non-adversarial, non-profit network of family partners, organizations, groups and agencies who joined together in collaboration to promote and advance the safety, permanency and well-being for children and their families that are involved in or at risk of becoming involved with the child welfare system.

I also want to talk to you real briefly about what it feels like to be a birth parent and to enter in to this big system that's unknown, and I want to tell you that as a birth parent who has lost her children, actually one child. I know how frustrating it can be, and I also know how hopeless it is. We as birth parents lose more than our children. Often times we've lost our voice. We are so frustrated, and so angry with ourselves and our own

behavior for what's happened to our children. We're just left in a completely hopeless and helpless situation. Sometimes it is real hard to find your way out of that hole, and that's where I think that the community initiatives as well as faith-based communities can really come along side parents and help them to make some connections. Most of the time birth parents that enter into that system are so isolated. I know that in our particular area, I'm in south east Kansas, and I know in our area we have a huge number of families that are addicted to substances. When that happens in the family, most of the time you end up, you've got parents that are arrested, you've got parents that are incarcerated, you've got all these issues, and sometimes it seems like the community or the churches, have a really hard time struggling to figure out how can we help.

So I want to share with you real quickly a couple of ways that you can help. One of the things that I do in my spare time is I work in our local jail with a group of women, most of which have lost custody of their children, and most of which also have substance abuse issues. I prepared a little handout with the help of the ladies in jail that has their ideas on how to support birth parents, and this handout will be available to you after our conference, but the ideas that they came up with. I was really surprised by the first one, and the first thing that they wanted on this list was to say become a foster parent, and the reason for that was that children so many times have to be placed outside of their home community and outside of their home school, because there aren't enough foster parents. So as a community member or as a church member that's one thing that everyone can do, is give some consideration to becoming a foster parent. There are many other things that are here on their list, and they range from the somewhat complicated, to just being a positive influence, offering a smile, inviting a parent that's lost their children to a community or church activity, and give them a ride. Many times birth parents are so isolated from their community, and therefore isolated from any support. The quicker they can build up a support system that will assist them while their children are removed from their home as well as when their children are returned to their home, the better chances that family has. The other thing that I would suggest to you is, that was mentioned and stressed by the ladies is support groups. They need drug and alcohol groups. They need parenting programs, they need parenting support groups, they need relapse prevention groups. They need all these supports, but they can't get them sometimes, for whatever reason, either transportation or they're not available in their home community. One of the biggest issues that parents have mentioned in our work with KFAN, as well as in the jail has been that many times, especially in our immediate area, one thing they need and they can't find is parenting classes. So any help that the community or the church can give in establishing and maintaining parenting classes that many times parents need in order to reintegrate with their children would be so helpful. The other thing is that one of the one of the biggest needs that they identified is helping parents just with tutoring for a GED. That employer,

if they would only understand and be open for sometimes for parents to rearrange time, for a parent to attend visitations or court hearings that involve their children, and there are several other ideas that are on this list, that like I said there will be a handout that will be available to you.

I also wanted to bring up the Parent Ally program, and it's an online training, it's available throughout the state of Kansas. There's a link that you can go to, and become a trained parent ally for your county, and a parent ally basically is somebody that can attend court hearings, but they don't have input, but what they can do is they can be there for the parents, somebody just to be there with you. It's kind of like going to the doctor, sometimes when you get there, you know you are too worried about something, and you need somebody else there to write notes for you and tell you what really happened at the appointment. When a parent walks into court they are just scared. They are scared of the judge, scared of the lawyers, scared of their case managers. They are just scared and don't understand what is happening. They don't listen real well because they are so worried about other things. The parent ally program enables someone else within the community can reach out to a parent and say I will go this mile with you and you don't have to go this alone. The ladies in my group also came up with some really excellent ideas for incarcerated birth parents. They wanted to make sure that I mentioned that you would have to work through your local facility or local jail to get approval for these things.

The next thing that I want to touch on real briefly before my time is up is that finding the parent who needs these services. How do you find them? And I asked the ladies if they could share with me how they suggest we find them and their answer was real simple. "Go to where we go." In other words, the jails are an excellent place. Any place in the community that offers a resource like WIC, DCF, food pantries, Salvation Army, any other community resource. Put fliers up there about what it is that you have, that you can offer them, it will get the word out. The other thing they wanted me to talk to you about today was identifying the need. If you will check with birthparents who are in this situation and get their input, you will have no trouble whatsoever identifying the needs within your own community. Each community is different and each community struggles in one area or another with giving those birthparents what they need.

I also talked about advertising the availability of it and the need to get the word out. The more little fliers you can get out the better off they will be on being able to locate you. And I think that is about all I wanted to share. Thank you very much for having me.

Amy Kahler:

Thank you so much Sherry.

Anna Pilato:

Sherry, this is Anna and I guess I wanted you to share because we do know that you have gotten your child back. And maybe you could just touch on that for a second and what that felt like to get your baby back.

Sherry Tomlinson:

Well at the time that my son was removed from my home, he was removed two different times due to substance abuse; I was at that time addicted to Methamphetamine. And I can tell you that that was the darkest time in my life, and I guess that is why I have such a passion for working with moms who are going through that same dark time. My son actually went across state lines and I struggled to have him removed and placed back in my home for about seven years. He returned back to my care, he returned to my home very traumatized to say the least and it took us a couple of years to work through that and to establish our relationship back to a healthy one. I can tell you that sometimes as a birth parent it feels like that even when you are doing the right things in your life that it takes an awful long time for things to work out the way they should. It can be really frustrating and extremely hopeless at times not only for the birthparent but also for the child as well. The only thing I can really tell you is don't ever give up on a birthparent and a child that want to be together because it can happen somehow, some way. My son is now, twenty years old and we have probably the best relationship that I could ever ask for. It all worked out in the end.

Anna:

We just want to thank you for sharing your story and being so vulnerable, and also how much in here were all looking at each other with smiles and how much we should celebrate you and you are just an inspiration to what you just addressed and not to give up that hope so thank you! That was off script but thank you and now I'm going to turn it back to Amy.

Amy:

Thank you so much Sherri and everyone for all the work you have done to share with us today. We do have several resources that we would like to share with everyone so that there are a number of ideas that we have for you and people in the community. We

don't want this to stop here we want all of this information to be shared with others who maybe couldn't join us today, ideas and things that you can do to make a difference.

We do have the DCF Family handbook. I'll just touch on that briefly. That is an excellent resource for families who recently found themselves in the system and are wanting to get their kids back home and this is also a great resource for anyone in the community who wants to help a family in that situation. If you just pull this up off of the DCF website which we'll go to in a minute you can find that there and I believe we also attached this to your handouts section of the live meeting. After the meeting you'll be able to go to your little handouts button, which is a little picture of three pieces of paper, and you will find lots of resources there that you can download and the handbook will help anyone learn about what's really going on, what everything means, and what really needs to happen for that reunification to turnabout.

Next, I would just like to show you www.youshare.org. This is an incredible resource that everyone can view and it actually is something that needs are put on here for our very own community. If a mom needs a stroller, or a crib or a high chair or someone needs an electrician or all sorts of things. If you join this, you will get emails sharing with you some of the local needs. Also on this you can list things that you have. If you have an unused comforter, that some little girl would love to use, you can list that there. If you are able to provide some type of service that someone could use, you can list that there. This is a way to meet needs with resources in our very own community that every one of us can do. So I really encourage you to go to youshare.org to find more out about that.

We also have the ideas to support birthparents tips sheet which hopefully many of you have downloaded that from the handouts. I would like to take you to the DCF website, which is www.dcf.ks.gov. You can go here to our home page, and if you go to our home page here, what I would direct you to first is 'Agency Information' at the top. You can click 'Agency Information' at the top and that will take you to the agency permission page. Then from there if you will go down to Strategic Development, Faith Based and Community Initiatives, it will bring you to this page and if you then go here to Faith Based and Community Initiatives that will bring you to this page with a number of resources. Today we are going to focus on Community Supports for Families, so if you just you click there, Community Supports for Families, you will find all of these resources, many of which we have touched on already today. What I wanted to show you next, when Sherri told us about being a Parent Ally, and down here you will see Parent Ally Program and if you'll just go there that will bring you to this Kansas Judicial Branch page where you can learn what that is and how you might be able to join as a Parent Ally and what that means and what a difference that can make.

From there, I'll just take you back to the DCF homepage. So this is our home page. And right now we have spotlight news and you can learn more here about June being Family Reunification Month. And from there it takes us to our Family Reunification Month and here is where I really wanted to point out the resources that we have available for you and many others in the communities. We have posters and half letters for families in crisis as well as posters and half letters to support families in crisis. So they are a little bit different. The poster is something that can be posted and this one looks like this, for ideas on how you can help. And then for the half sheet, this is to support families in crisis, there is a half sheet here with lots of information about what people can do to get involved, ways that families can get involved, how they can support, and also sharing many of the statistics to inform people of all of this.

So, I would just like to offer those to you, those are available on the website obviously, and also in your handouts of the Live Meeting, you can download those, you can print those. You can also request those to be sent to you or your organization or your church or anywhere in your community you would like to distribute those or post those up. The way to request those is to go to sdcontacts@dcf.ks.gov that is an email address. It's S, for Strategic, D, for Development, sdcontacts@dcf.ks.gov. You can email there or you can even email through the contact you have through Eventbrite and request any of those printed materials to be used in your community through the month of June.

So, just to end this now, we do have a wonderful video that has been put together that involves clips of families who have been reunified as well as stories of foster families that have supported others and helped families to reunify. With that video I believe, is also a KVC social worker and they will just really explain that process of reunification. It is a great resource for all of us to share with as many people as possible in this month of June. And unfortunately it is just too big. It was too big to load to our live meeting to share that with you together so here is what I am asking everyone to do. If you are on your computer, we'll close this out and you can go to Facebook and type in Kansas Department for Children and Families, if you have not already liked our Facebook page. So go to your Facebook and go to Kansas Department for Children and Families and this video is actually the first post that you will see there. So you can go there and watch this 8 minute video and then share it, we encourage you to share it so that a lot of people have an opportunity to see it. But also if you are only with us by conference call, we invite you to stay with us on here on the phone and we are going to play the video so we can all view it here and hopefully you will be able to listen in to hear the audio thorough this conference call if you want to. For some of you we might lose you now but for some of you who are going to try to listen in we are going to test this out and see how it works. We just want to thank you now and we will close with this video, so thanks a lot. Two things, or I guess just one thing would be to go to Facebook and watch the video and share. The second thing is, you will receive a Survey Monkey, so if you have

questions now you wish you could ask or if you have comments you want to share with us, we invite you to fill out that survey, we would appreciate your feedback. Okay, thank you. We will begin our video.