

Episode 282— Dr. Felicity Northcott: International Social Service: The Social Worker for Social Workers

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hi from Buffalo! It's mid-March, and no discussion of all things Irish is possible without mentioning South Buffalo. Our city's Irish enclave is home to the Buffalo Irish Center, an Irish historical district complete with Gaelic street signage and ornaments, South Park Lake and Cazenovia Parks. And if you're here the weekends before and after St. Patrick's Day, be ready for the spectacle of the Old First Ward's family parade and our larger downtown parades. It will not be quiet. I'm Peter Sobota. If you've ever wondered about how social work can address the local to global connection in social work practice and work collaboratively on social issues, we have the person and the organization for you. Most of us have some sensitivity to the challenges in our own foster care and child welfare systems. Now imagine conducting home studies, finding relatives, obtaining documents and post-placement monitoring in another country or on another continent.

[00:01:41] In this episode, our guest, Dr. Felicity Northcott, an expert in international child welfare, describes her work with International Social Services USA. ISS is a global child protection and social services network of social workers and lawyers built to connect vulnerable children, adults and families that are separated by an international border to the support and information and services they need. Dr. Northcott describes the challenges and the unique expertise that's necessary to reunite children and families all over the world. Dr. Felicity Northcott PhD is director of partnership and international services for ISS USA. Dr. Northcott was interviewed in November of 2019 by our own Katie McClain-Meeder, Clinical Assistant Professor for Field Education here at the UB School of Social Work.

[00:02:36] Welcome. My name's Katie McClain-Meeder, Clinical Assistant Professor at the UB School of Social Work. I'm thrilled to be talking today with Dr. Felicity Sackville Northcott about international social work and her work with the International Social Service USA Organization. Dr. Northcott, as we begin, I'm wondering if you can define for us what you mean by international social work.

[00:02:57] Sure. Thanks, Katie. So at International Social Service USA, we have a sort of three-pronged definition of what we think international social work encompasses. The first is something that's pretty common and people are pretty aware of it, and it's U.S. social workers who are working with foreign born populations within the United States. So social workers who are providing case management or direct services or clinical services to asylees or refugees or unaccompanied children. So that's something that's pretty common. People are aware of it. The second is when U.S. trained U.S. social workers go to a foreign country to provide social services, again, whether it's some kind of community macro-based kind of service or whether it's clinical work. So they're going overseas to provide their social work skills. And those are the two most commonly known when we talk about international social work. And then there's us, and we're a bit different because what we do is we work across borders with partners in other countries to provide services, to promote permanency planning, to reunify people with their families when they've been separated to find family members for kids who are in foster care. And we don't ever get to

travel. So our type of social work is a bit different. And it's one of the things that we often find a bit challenging is explaining that the international peace means that while we're not actually traveling internationally or necessarily working with foreign populations in the U.S., all our cases have an international component to them.

[00:04:25] Absolutely. It sounds like fascinating and challenging work. And I'm wondering how what you do at the International Social Service USA is different from other organizations. You sort of alluded to it earlier, but how it's different than other organizations that work with refugees or asylees in the U.S.

[00:04:43] So social workers who are working with refugees or asylees in the clinical level, they're often working to provide clinical support for various kinds of traumas, working on acculturation issues. And then there are social workers who are doing, again, the more macro piece and more sort of community based work to help refugees and asylees sort of negotiate the various kinds of services and resources that they need. We don't do any of that. If there is not an international border between the person who is requesting the service and where the service is needed, we don't take the case. So if there was a refugee who was looking for family in a foreign country, certainly we could help them do that. But we would never provide a direct service to somebody in the U.S. if their requests for the service came from within the U.S..

[00:05:30] How do folks find you?

[00:05:32] One of the things we've been working on probably for the last nine years is really increasing our visibility. And part of that is having people really understand what we do, because it's not commonsensical either for social workers or for individuals that a service like ours exists. The fact that we've been around for 95 years, it can be a bit frustrating that people don't know more about us. We have contracts with several states to provide services. We've really increased our social media presence in order to have people see us out and about more. We present at a lot of conferences. We do a lot of publications. We work with embassies. We target certain populations for to get information to them so that they know that the individuals who are in their care can benefit from our services. We will take a referral from anybody. There just has to be a connection to the work that we do and the work that our partners do.

[00:06:24] So speaking of the work that you do, can you give us a sense of the issues that you're working on and the scope? So how big are the issues in terms of people impacted?

[00:06:34] So let me just take this sort of step back and explain a little bit about the network, because I think that's crucial to understanding where we fit into the big picture. So ISS USA, International Social Service USA is the American member of a network of social workers and lawyers working in about 130 countries around the world. So we have network partners in those one hundred and thirty countries and we work International Social Service member to International Social Service member. So, again, we're not sending our social workers to Ireland to do a home study and our partner in Ireland isn't sending somebody over here to do a home study in Ohio. So we rely on the expertise of social workers and lawyers who are trained in the country where they're working. So we don't have to rely on somebody who's not familiar with the culture, with the rules, with the standards of social work practice. All those sorts of things are taken care of because all these people are trained and licensed to the requirements of the country within which they live. So the issues that we as a network focus on, and that's very broad, we serve more than 75,000 families a year in the network, we work on issues primarily involving children

and families that are separated across the border. That means lots and lots of different populations of people. You have children on the move. Children who are moving from one country to another as an unaccompanied minor. You have children who are moving with their families into another country because of war, famine or some other natural or man-made disaster. We work with families where a child is in some kind of institutional care and really advocating for when we talk about out-of-home care, reducing the number of kids who are in institutional care, particularly kids with disabilities. We work with kids who are in foster care because of abuse or neglect or abandonment. So the big, big broad issues are reuniting children and families across borders. And then how that plays out with each individual case obviously is dependent upon what the particular situation of the child or the family is.

[00:08:39] So there's this amazing visual on your website about the work of the organization. And while the mission of the organization has remained for 95 years and going, can you give us a sense of how some of the issues have changed?

[00:08:54] Sure. I mean, historically, the purpose of the network, way back when there were some brilliant women, social workers who were seeing the problems that immigrants were facing either in transit to the US or once they arrived in the U.S. Immigration laws would change while you were on the boat from Bremen to Baltimore and you would arrive, you thought you had the right kind of paperwork or documentation, and in the 10 days it took you to cross the Atlantic, the rules changed. And so people were faced with these really complicated circumstances, and obviously, as newly arriving immigrants didn't have the resources and support they needed to be able to negotiate this crazy process that was going on. So that was one big issue, and the other big issue that they saw was often the men came before the women so that the fathers, the grandfathers, the brothers, they arrived first so that they could find work and establish a home of some kind. And then the women and the younger children would arrive later. Often these women and children arrived and they couldn't find the rest of the family or the family was in such dire straits that there was no way to support the growing size of the family. So the idea was that you would create a network of social workers, both in the countries from where people were going and in the countries to where they were moving, and that there would be communication about particular families and cases before the family left so that there was sort of a case plan in the event that when they arrived, there were certain kinds of barriers or challenges that the family faced or the social worker in the arriving country could anticipate those and make contingency plans. So that was sort of the very basic idea of it. And that idea of cross-border communication is obviously central today. The kinds of things we've worked on over the last 95 years have changed. The network got very involved in international adoption. We also got out of it very early because we had serious concerns about the way things were being managed, how people were identifying children as orphans, et cetera, et cetera. And so the network itself has become very active in advocating for best practices in a variety of things, including adoption. So adoption was a big issue. And then as we sort of got out of the adoption game, we kind of had to rethink what it was we were going to do. Who were those populations of people that we could serve utilizing this sort of cornerstone of cross-border communication? So that's when we really started working with children in foster care, with refugee children who were moving because of the need to leave a country and then working with post adoption tracing. That's one of the big things that we do because we were involved in the adoption process. Now we're helping folks find their biological families. Institutional care has become a big issue. And then thinking ahead, because part of what you have to do when you're a small nonprofit, even though you're a part of a big network, is what are those issues coming up that are going to or potentially could be a value added in terms of helping individuals who have a cross-border

component to their case? So surrogacy and donor conception is something that the network is looking at because we're seeing more and more surrogate mothers are in a developing country while the person who or the family that's getting the child is in the U.S. or Canada or some similar kind of place. Part of the success of the network is this ability to be really flexible, creative and responsive. And you have to monitor things are changing very quickly and the kinds of populations that are going to need this intensive case management and this cross-border communication is never going to be less than it is today. And in fact, it's increasing dramatically as we look at more and more multinational families and more and more folks living in a country that is not their country of birth. The largest number in the history of the world right now is people not living in the country where they were born. So part of what we have to do is monitor not only the world around us, but what are people calling and asking us about. We get probably six to 800 requests for information, just ISS USA, not the network, every year. And so we're very cognizant of the fact that we need to monitor what's being asked of us, because if there is a service that we could be providing that we're not right now, we want to add that to the list of things that we can do.

[00:13:04] Absolutely. Yeah, You mentioned the growing number of people moving around. And so not only in terms of numbers, but what are other reasons that social workers and human service practitioners should know about cross-border social work in case management?

[00:13:19] If you just look at the number of children who are in the United States foster care system, we estimate that there's probably in excess of 60 to 750,00 kids, U.S. born citizen kids, who have some kind of family connection in a foreign country, currently in foster care. If you think that one in four kids in America has at least one foreign born parent, and that's just in the entire country, obviously in certain areas, New Jersey, for example, it's one in three kids has a foreign born parent. The potential for all those kids if they entered the foster care system to need to connect to a family resource outside of the U.S. is very high. You have to ask every single child in your care and the stakeholders in that case, is there a family resource outside of the U.S.? And it's not just foreign born people. There are somewhere between five and 6,000,000 Americans have retired overseas. In any given year there's something like 300,000 students studying overseas. That doesn't include military. So how many tens of thousands of military personnel are living in a foreign country? So the mentality, the frame of mind we want people to get out of is stopped thinking about international cases as only involving children who were born outside of the United States, because there's that sort of knee jerk reaction that if the kid doesn't look or "sound," and I'm using air quotes, like somebody who's foreign born or even the parent that may be involved in the case doesn't look or "sound" like they're foreign born, nobody asks the question. So there's a potential for tens of thousands of kids to just sort of be sitting around waiting for someone to find a relative. And even if it's not for placement, it could be for visitation or getting birthday cards from their nana in Scotland. And so it's really important to understand that if you don't ask every single child you're going to miss probably close to one in four of those kids who does have a resource that's not being assessed, is not being engaged and is not being either considered for placement or being identified as not being an appropriate placement.

[00:15:28] I think it reminds me when you're saying, you know, 25 percent of kids in this country have a foreign born parent, that your work in these issues really intersect with so many of our service systems, whether it be foster care or education. And it's not just necessarily what we think of like as an immigration issue, but that it's really intertwined with all of these systems of service delivery. And unless we as service providers in those

systems are aware and asking those questions, as you mentioned, how many are going unasked and unserved.

[00:16:03] Yeah. And I think that's what is frustrating. I mean, I think obviously concurrent planning is sort of the standard bearer now, right? Everybody knows you're supposed to be pursuing all possibilities at the same time. And I think the family finding engagement piece of concurrent planning is often where there's that breakdown because you're identifying the family that's in New Jersey, but you're not identifying the family that's in New Guinea. And so we often see cases where we're coming in late to the game because the non-custodial father is living in Guatemala. And so I think there's sort of dual things going on. One is this inability to recognize that every child potentially has some kind of international family connection. And then also there's still this unspoken bias against the paternal side of the family. And often that's one of those things we also need to get over is that the child has two parents. And if it's the paternal grandparents or the paternal aunt or uncle, those are just as viable options as the maternal side of the family.

[00:17:02] Yeah. You're alluding to a few, but what are some of the biggest challenges to cross-border case management?

[00:17:08] So obviously the big one is identifying the fact that the child has these international family resources. There was a study done back in 2008 now and it was talking about the challenges of interstate planning, even with the interstate compact on the placement of children there were these challenges. And we applied for a fostering connections grant and I used that study to sort of talk about if you think it's hard on the interstate level, here are the barriers on the inter-country level. There can be barriers as simple to rectify as not allowing a case worker to make a long distance phone call. So you limit the case worker's ability to actually reach out to a family member in a foreign country. Not being able to access social media on a work computer can be really difficult because often family finding involves simple things like going to Facebook and putting dad's name into it and seeing if it's a potential match. Those are sort of the easy ones to overcome. The really difficult ones are, and we did a massive survey when we did our Fostering Connections Research Project, and there's just a lot of inherent bias about the fact that people think the United States is the only place where kids can be raised in a happy and appropriate environment. And I can't remember who said this, but one of our staff people said "Every child deserves a safe and loving home. Not every kid needs a PlayStation." And so it's kind of tempering your expectations and understanding that even in foreign countries there are child protection systems in place that are equally as interested in caring for kids as ours. And I often when I'm training, I talk to folks about we have a number of cases where there are U.S. kids who have been put in foster care or some kind of long term foster care in a foreign country. And the judge doesn't want to release them because they think the United States is a really dangerous place for kids. So one of the things that we do in addition to working with social workers is training judges on what their expectations should be when they're requesting services in a foreign country. So a home study from Guatemala may look very different than a home study from Georgia. But that doesn't mean that you do not have sufficient information to make an informed decision about what's in that child's best interest. We do our best to make sure that our foreign partners are providing reports and services and supervision that will meet the standards of the U.S. so that we don't run into that problem of "Well, this is clearly not enough information for me to make a decision." So those kinds of inherent biases make it really difficult. And even if it's not a personal bias, we discovered that there are sort of institutional cultural barriers against this. So case practice manuals don't even mention how to go about looking for family in a foreign country. When you look at the case practice

or the guidelines on family finding, it doesn't explicitly say you don't do it, but it doesn't give you any indication that you should be doing it. And so one of the frequent things we hear is "There is a bias in my own office. And so if I went to my supervisor and said, 'look, I know that this kid's grandmother lives in Canada,' my supervisor is going to say to me, 'well, we're not sending a kid to Canada and we can't afford that. And I don't even know how to call Canada. So just put it aside.'" So those institutional barriers, those personal biases, and then the first question people ask is, "I don't know how to do this. How would I talk to somebody in Mexico?" And it's even as basic as that. It's "How do I call somebody? How do I know that I can get a home study done in Mexico? Or what if I send the kid and it's going to be following up with this child or what happens if the placement disrupts?" So there's so much concern about being able to provide the same level and types of service that they would on a domestic case for an international case. And so we spend a lot of time reassuring people that you can do exactly the same thing. It's just a little different because it looks different in different places.

[00:21:07] Can you talk a little bit about your process once a resource has been identified in another country? What are you all doing in terms of working with the host country to ensure homestudy and safe and happy places for kids?

[00:21:23] So we literally do everything that you would do here. So we get a referral from Virginia and Virginia says there's a resource for this child in Canada and we say, okay, but the child has special needs. The child has some developmental delays, the child needs some physical therapy. So we get a very comprehensive referral from the state of Virginia that says we would like a home study done on the child's grandparents in Quebec, and we say, okay. So the first thing we would do is to identify which services in addition to a home study would benefit this particular child. Every single case is based on the merits of the case itself and the individual child. So when we have a child who has special needs, we want to be able to identify prior to any decision about the child being moved the resources and services that will be available to support that child in the same way that he or she is getting services here in the U.S. So we actually created a number of years ago an assessment tool, which we call the Community Resource Assessment. And it's, in very simple terms, it's sort of a home study on the community. And it identifies all the resources, all the services. And it also identifies potential hazards for the child depending on the child's particular situation, there may be certain circumstances or dangers that are presented to the child in that community. And so it's a very balanced view of where that child would be living. So we do the Community Resource Assessment and then we do the home study. Those two things get written up into a report and then we send it to our partner in Canada, does it, they send it to us. We work with the case worker here in the state of Virginia, and we get her all that information. We can also do family finding. Lots of times people, they know there's a grandmother, but they're not sure exactly where she is. We can facilitate the inclusion of parents and extended family in foreign countries in things like family team meetings, in court hearings and all the steps that need to be taken to make a decision in the child's best interest. We can either facilitate or we can actually provide a direct service. We also spend a lot of our time reminding case workers of things like as we are working on the home study and the Community Resource Assessment, be sure you're talking to the Canadian embassy to make sure that this child can enter the country legally, can access all the services that she needs, and that this is a sustainable placement for this child. Because that's the other piece of it i,s it's not like moving a kid from Ohio to Oregon. There are immigration issues. There are in various countries who can get citizenship is fairly limited in other countries, if your great grandfather was Swiss, you can become a Swiss national and that's great. So we do a lot of that kind of technical support to make sure at every step of the process we are anticipating whatever outcome is

going to happen. So while there may be family reunification here in the U.S., we want to make sure that if they're sending that kid to Canada, that we don't get to the point of, yes, we're ready to go and the kid cannot stay legally. And and it happens, unfortunately, far too frequently. So that's the first part of it, then, that the determination is that the child is going to go live with the family in Canada. So Virginia says "we need you to help us. Can you do a little bit of the reintegration piece for us or integration piece?" So our social worker can meet the family, meet the case worker and the child at the airport. She already is familiar with the family because she's on the home study with them. And then she provides that post placement supervision piece. And depending on the needs of the family and the child, that can be more or less intensive. So that sort of reintegration or integration into the community is overseen by the same social worker who did the home study so that there's already a history with the family before the child has even arrived. And that Community Resource Assessment has now been turned into sort of a case plan for the kid. Because we've identified where the therapeutic services are, we've identified where the school is, we've identified all those things the child needs to immediately move into So that is not something that happens on the back end of the process, it happens before the child even returns.

[00:25:25] Is that Community Resource Assessment publicly available?

[00:25:29] No. The reason it isn't is because, partly because it's the intellectual property of ISS. And it's one of the things that we found to be just amazingly useful for us. And our fear is, and just to give you a really short background, the reason I initially developed this was because working particularly in the northern triangle countries of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, one of the things that we were finding was attorneys who were trying to assist the children here to get immigration status. There were sort of a general view of where they were returning by judges like "it's all bad, so we don't care." And I realize that the piece that was missing, my PhD is in anthropology, what we really needed was sort of a mini ethnography of the actual community, not just the kids going to Honduras, but the kid is going to this neighborhood in Honduras. This is an individual child who identifies as being gay. And this particular community has some of the highest violence against gay, lesbian, transgendered, bisexual youth in the country. We develop it to be very specific to each child. And of course, our fear is if everybody can use it, then it doesn't any longer have the same impact that we would want it to have because everybody has it.

[00:26:40] Sure, yeah. Might not be using it in the way you intended. So you've alluded to your work in both sort of the macro policy level change spaces as well as the micro level working with kids very individually. Can you say more about the integration of these approaches in your work and why that's so important?

[00:27:01] Well, again, I think part of the brilliance of the network itself is understanding of this macro piece as well as sort of the micro piece. And one of the things that we preach constantly is no matter what the circumstances are, whether it's a parental abduction or it's a divorce or it's an adoption, every single conversation has to focus on the individual child, that we can't make these broad generalizations about groups of kids. And whether we're talking about kids who are separated at the border as opposed to unaccompanied kids or kids who are in foster care as opposed to kids who are in institutional care. Those are big, broad issues that we all deal with. But each individual child's case looks completely different. There is no one answer for any individual child. And if we get a case and there are three kids involved, two of them, it may be appropriate for a particular outcome, but for one it's not. So you literally have to look at each individual child and what their

circumstances are and what is in their best interest and kind of drown out the background noise of dad wants this and mom wants that and the GAL wants this and the judge wants that. We find that if we can circle back around to what is in the child's best interest, we often can have the warring factions come together and work in a much more cooperative space, because we often see that the GAL, the Guardian ad Litem for the child, has a different view of what's great for the child as opposed to the social worker. So part of this is getting people to talk the same language, which means we're looking at the child and you have all this information and let's see what is in that individual child's best interest.

[00:28:39] Can you speak more to how you get all those systems to cooperate? The judges, the foster care system, case workers, the guardian ad litem. How do you work collaboratively? And I imagine that takes a lot of resources and energy and training. Can you speak to that work?

[00:28:58] Yeah. I mean, it is, as we all know, one of the most challenging parts of working with the child welfare system is it is quite fragmented. And it's not just fragmented between legal and social service, but just within itself. So one of the things we do, yes, we do a lot of training and we train not just social workers. We have trained over the years probably 2000 judges, lawyers, guardians ad litem. We're doing a lot more work with the court appointed special advocate groups to help them understand what our role is in supporting their work. We've done a really good job of being able to engage with a variety of stakeholders by speaking their language, if that makes sense. So engaging an attorney and talking about what their legal responsibility is under not only federal U.S. law, but what they're also compelled to do under international law. So we're able to talk to that piece to them. And we're also able to kind of translate for them what the social worker is saying. You often see this sort of disconnect between social service and legal providers in any given case. And it's important to make that professional cultural translation clear for everybody so that people understand that they may actually be saying something very similar, but they're saying it in very different ways based on what their interlocutors are. So we do a lot of that kind of negotiation. We encourage really strongly for judicial communication across international borders. So if there's a judge that's making a decision about a child and there's a parent working with the court system in a foreign country, judges talking to each other can make a huge difference because there's, again, that reassurance that you're not just sending the child out into the great beyond, but that there is a legal and social service system in place in that country that has the same interests in protecting that child as we do.

[00:30:49] Absolutely. If you could train the social workers who are listening, you know, in five bullet points, what do we need to know to better identify and serve children and our social workers care who have family resources outside of the U.S.?

[00:31:04] So the first thing is, again, I'm reminding everybody, ask every single client, don't just ask the ones that you think might or have already alluded to. Second, identify those resources that they're going to allow you to engage their family in the foreign country. I mean, ISS is one service, we're the only social service entity in the U.S. that does precisely what we do, but there are other resources. So look for other resources. Some counties have agreements with consulates, for example. Can the consulate help you engage with the family? Can the consulate help you do a home study? So think about all the potential resources that are available to you to identify, engage and assess those family resources. Third, really, really be self-reflective about your own potential biases when you're asking questions, looking for resources, doing assessments, accepting assessments. There are a 193 countries in the world. All of them love their kids, but they

may not have the same kind of material resources that some countries have. But again, not every kid needs a PlayStation. Every kid needs a safe, loving home. So really think about that and ask questions. Always ask questions. If you need some kind of reassurance or need a better understanding, go online and look for, you know, mutual aid societies or whatever they're called in these days, where you can talk to people from that country and get a sense of what it's like. So kind of immersing yourself. I'm not a big believer in the term cultural competence. As an anthropologist, I have a real issue with the term cultural competence. I don't expect anybody to be culturally competent for every potential country where they might have a client resource, but being self-reflective and being open minded to the possibilities of a child living a happy, productive, sustainable life in a foreign country, that to me is far more important than feeling like you have to understand the inner workings of various different cultures. And then fifth, always, always, always follow up. One of the things that we find incredibly frustrating is that the decision will be made to place the child with a relative in a foreign country. And you've done all the steps right up to this point. You've gotten the home study, you've gotten the criminal background checks, you've done the DNA test, you've done everything right, then you send the child and then you don't follow up. Just because that child is not in your care anymore. The opportunity to identify problems, so if the social worker in the foreign country is doing those post-placement reports and they identified that there's an issue, she or he is going to be working with that family and you are going to know that that child that you have been responsible for for however long is actually getting those services. And if the child is not getting those services and the child ends up in the child welfare system in that foreign country, if it's a U.S. child, that child could be coming back to the U.S. and back into your care. So really be diligent about making sure that you follow up. Partly because, again, I think it's going to reassure most people; in the 12 years I've been with ISS, only two kids that were placed overseas have ever been returned to the U.S. That's reassuring. But it's also best practice. You wouldn't place the child in an interstate case and not have some kind of follow up or supervision for that child. So the bottom line is anything that you would do for an interstate case, you can and should do for an international case.

[00:34:22] Absolutely. So there's been a lot of attention to the issue of forced family separation at the southern U.S. border. But this is, as you mentioned, only a small fraction of the children your network serves. So can you talk more about what other children might need?

[00:34:36] So the population of kids that we serve, the largest group of kids are U.S. born children in the state child welfare system, state or county. I would say of those 600 kids that we serve last year, 450 to 500 of them are U.S. citizen children in foster care in various states in the U.S. We are doing more work with kids from primarily Guatemala and Honduras who are voluntarily returning. We're working on a project to do safe repatriation and reintegration and we are using the Community Resource Assessment as the pre-departure planning tool for those kids. So we do work with kids who are unaccompanied. We do work with kids who were separated at the border. We do work with kids who are foreign born. But again, it's not our primary focus. And we want people to be aware that there are a lot more kids who don't look or sound like they need our services that do need our services than our being identified.

[00:35:38] Absolutely. And I think we think of family separation at the border when we think of cross-border family reunification or separation. How do we bring the U.S. born kids who may have family resources in other countries more into the spotlight? Because clearly it's a huge need.

[00:35:58] I mean, again, it's that simple and sort of anecdotally, I'll tell a little story. So when we had this Fostering Connections grant from 2009 to 2012, part of what we did was to create this really in-depth training module and everybody was gonna be trained and it was like four hours long and we created all these wonderful materials. A year later, we saw absolutely no change in the number of cases that were being referred from the state where this went on. And I thought, well, there's obviously a problem here. And I said, well, let's try something really simple. Let's just create a poster that every single frontline social worker is going to get and hang up in their office. And it was really simple. It said "One in three kids in your state has a foreign born parent. Have you asked your client?" And it was really pretty. You had the cute kids in it, it was bright red. And the international liaison in the state went to every local office and did a really short presentation and everybody got one of these little posters. In that year we almost tripled the number of referrals that we got. And it really was just this little visual reminder. You don't wait for somebody that you think has a foreign connection, just ask everybody. If they say no, then you keep it moving and you look at the domestic options. And I often use my granddaughter, who was born in Spain. My son is dual national and his wife is a dual national. So here's a kid who potentially has five citizenships to choose from. He is blond haired, brown eyed, speaks English without an accent. Nobody would ever expect that she has family in Argentina and Spain and England. And you can't judge a book by the cover in that way.

[00:37:28] That's a great example of your point where we have to examine our own biases and who we think of when we think of someone who might have a global resource and expanding our own understandings and asking the question of all the kids we come in contact with.

[00:37:46] Yeah, but it's also, I mean you think of the number of folks who are getting to retirement years and Baby Boomers. There's a lot of us and a lot of us don't want to live in the U.S. when we retire because we can go to a foreign country where our limited resources go a lot further. So we do a lot of home studies and even for visitation of grandparents who've retired to the Caribbean or wherever it happens to be. So, you know, it's not necessarily just that the kid has a foreign born family member, but more and more Americans live outside of the US, just like more and more other folks are not living in their country of origin.

[00:38:19] Absolutely. So I'm curious how you sustain your work. It sounds super challenging and really important. And I'm curious how you continue to find energy to invest in this work.

[00:38:32] It's a really interesting job. And for my case managers, it's really interesting because some of them came out of other jobs where case management meant you're actually working with kids and there's like a living, breathing child in front of you. Ours is sort of this weird hybrid because you sort of take that step back and you're not actually working directly with the child. You're really, as one person put it, sort of a social worker for the social worker. So you're dealing with the expectations of the social worker here and you're dealing with the expectations of our partner in the foreign country. And it's a bit removed from what traditional case management looks like. But as we say at every case manager's meeting on Thursday, that case there is a child waiting for you to get this service done, so let's get it done. There's never a typical case. Things become incredibly complicated. The ins and outs of any particular case can require engaging with the Department of State and an attorney and a social worker and a judge. And so there's no routine to it. It's not like, "oh, we're getting another home study in Mexico." It's like, "oh my God, we're getting a home study in Mexico, But the child was abducted and then the father

was arrested and deported," and there's always something different. I think oddly, despite the current political climate, it's been very good for us in terms of our visibility, because people really understand the idea of kids being separated from their parents across the border when they look at what's happening in the U.S. at our southern border, that kids are literally being separated from their parents. And it's allowed us sort of a space to talk more broadly about what does it mean for kids to be separated. There's just sort of tendency to focus on the most current thing going on in the country, but it wasn't terribly long ago that we were talking about the tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors who had come into the U.S. And that population of children for a variety of reasons are entering the domestic child welfare system because the federal system that had original oversight over them was not capable of doing the same kind of pre-placement assessments that a social worker in that state system would. So kids were being released to sponsorships these sponsorships are disrupting at quite an alarming rate. These kids are ending up in the domestic child welfare system because they've been abused or neglected or abandoned. And so those kinds of things has helped us explain what we do, because everybody kind of understands that and it's easy to identify those kids. And so in some ways, the terrible things that have been happening obviously has allowed us to expand some of the services that we're doing in support of those separated and unaccompanied kids. But it's also allowed us that space to talk about what we do more broadly.

[00:41:12] It sounds like a great and classic strengths-based perspective from social work, reframing current political climate challenges into an opportunity to spotlight an issue that people understand sort of at a fundamental level and then also take it to the next level of talking about your work with other kids. So as we conclude your agency is based in Baltimore, if I'm not mistaken. But how can our listeners who are listening from all over get involved or support or be a part of the work that you do?

[00:41:45] So right off the bat, one of the things that we're always looking for and I haven't mentioned this but in addition to doing all these cases where we're sending requests for services to our foreign partners, we get about a third of our cases every year are incoming from our foreign partners. So requests from England to do a home study on an aunt in Florida or whatever the situation is. And we also are doing interstate cases now, when the interstate compact cannot be invoked. And for those folks who don't know, if the person being considered for placement is a non-custodial parent and the parent has no prior involvement with CPS, you cannot invoke the compact. So we are now doing interstate cases for a number of states on those cases as well. So one of the things we're always looking for, our social workers who would like to become private contractors with us to provide those services, because we have a network around the country of social workers who on a case by case basis provide the home study or whatever it is. We live in a big country with lots of people, so we're always looking for social workers who'd be interested in working with us. We do training for you. We have all the template for all those studies. And it can be quite interesting. We've had some social workers who've been working with us for eight, nine years now. So if you're interested in that visit our website. The other thing is remembering that we're here when you have a case or you have a question. As I said early on, one of the things we do a lot of is just kind of talk people through what the situation is and what are the resources that are available. If it's not a service we can provide, we're happy to help you identify what other services you might need. Happy to help you understand what rules and responsibilities you have under particular kinds of situations. So I think reaching out to us is one of the simplest ways to sort of answer those questions. Trainings, we do a lot of training. If folks are interested in having us do a webinar for their agency or as an individual, you can reach out to us and we can set that up for you. I mean, I guess just sharing the information on our website, we have a whole

bunch of one page resource guides which folks can download. And again, once you sort of understand the basics, then reach out to us and we can help you with the more complicated pieces of it. But think every time you have a case, does this kid have some kind of, you know, family resource or option in another country?

[00:44:02] Can you give a shout out to what your website is?

[00:44:05] www.ISS-USA.org.

[00:44:11] Felicity, I'm so grateful for you taking the time to talk with me today. Thank you for the important work that you are doing.

[00:44:17] Well, thank you for having me, and I look forward to hearing from all your listeners.

[00:44:22] You've been listening to Dr. Felicity Northcott discuss International Social Services on inSocialWork.

[00:44:37] Hi, I'm Nancy Smyth, professor and Dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school, our history, our online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs, we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there, check out our Technology and Social Work Research Center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.