

Episode 283: Dr. Robin Leake: Child Welfare and COVID-19: Ensuring health and well-being in a global pandemic

[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] Hello again from Buffalo. We are eeking our way back and on behalf of the inSocialWork podcast crew and U.B. School of Social Work, we send warm wishes hoping you and knows you are well and that you're moving forward in these difficult times. As we considered returning to producing podcasts, we wondered how social workers and our profession were coping with the massive disruption of Covid-19. The typical day-to-day challenges of child welfare workers are well-documented. Ensuring the safety and well-being of children is tough enough under normal circumstances. Now try that in a pandemic. For this perspective, we turn to our guest, Dr. Robin Leake, who, along with her other academic pursuits, is also project director for the National Child Welfare Workforce Initiative, also known as NCWWI. Dr. Leake describes how the impact of the pandemic essentially shut down the family court system, stopped home visits and visitation experiences and led to an urgent pivot in services in a rapidly escalating crisis. You will recall that personal protective equipment was in short supply, distancing guidelines inconsistent, and knowledge of diagnosis and transmission barely understood. Not the ideal circumstances to keep eyes on kids. Dr. Leake discusses how readers and social workers navigated the crisis, attempting to ensure the safety of their clients and of themselves. She details how workers urgently transition to virtual platforms and workforces, how they attend to their core mission in the new reality, how they are supporting families and how workers are struggling with the impact on their own lives. Robin Leake PhD is a research associate professor at the Graduate School of Social Work and the acting executive director of the Butler Institute of Families at the University of Denver. She was interviewed in May of 2020 by our own Dr. Annette Semanchin-Jones, associate professor here at the U.B. School of Social Work. By the way, Dr. Semanchin-Jones, the U.B. School of Social Work and in partnership with the Erie County Department of Social Services, has been awarded a grant through the Children's Bureau and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, referred to in our podcast as NCWWI, as one of the seven workforce excellent sites across the United States.

[00:02:54] Hello, this is Annette Semanchin-Jones. I'm an associate professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, and I'm here with Robin Leake.

[00:03:01] Hi, this is Robin Leake and I am a research associate professor at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work, and I am also the director of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute.

[00:03:13] So today I am very excited that we'll be talking about a very relevant and timely topic. We're going to be talking about how Covid-19 is affecting child welfare service delivery and talk about some of the unique dynamics right now, particularly for vulnerable children and families. So thanks very much, Robin, for being here to talk about this topic. So first, looking at the child welfare services and workforce, what would you say are some of the biggest obstacles right now facing social workers in child welfare?

[00:03:41] Yes, so, you know, in general, child welfare workers, they have the same barriers that have burdened the system for a number of years, including high workload due to very high caseloads and just the intense job pressure and nature of the job, traditionally low pay and high rates of burnout just from the work with children and families who are experiencing complex trauma and the stress of working in public and private and travel agencies that are highly bureaucratic by nature. And all of these factors lead to chronically high turnover rates, traditionally ranging from 20 to 50 percent nationwide, mostly within the first two years of the job. So it leads to a revolving door of staff often who are new or in training and lack critical skills and the experience needed for the job. So that's just the normal backdrop of child welfare challenges and stressors that we've been dealing with for probably the last 20 years or so. And now that we're in the middle of a pandemic, child welfare agencies are faced with the incredible challenge of immediately shifting to a virtual workforce, moving all of their staff and operations out of the agency, establishing policies and protocols and procedures for how to support a virtual workforce, while also ensuring the safety and well-being of children and families in their care and the physical safety of their workforce from the virus itself. Most agencies closed around the middle to the end of March, which is just hard to believe it's only been two months. And they immediately had to ensure that their workforce had the technology resources to work from home. So they had to figure out really quickly how to conduct investigations while protecting their workforce and their families from the virus and other parts of the system just pretty much ground to a halt. For example in many states, courts completely shut down. And as a result, there were no reunification hearings at all. So children who were either close to reunifying with families or close to adoption all of a sudden had to remain in their placements, which can be really traumatizing for children. And it also just took a while, in addition to the standstill services, it just took a while for agencies to figure out how to move beyond even mission critical, essential services to supporting families and engaging with families in the ways that they know is best practice. So how to conduct home visits, how to connect children with parents, and how to do all the day to day eyes on children in connection with families that they're accustomed to.

[00:06:01] Yeah, absolutely. So you really raised a lot of specific challenges right now that child welfare agencies are really trying to address. So I'm going to kind of dig it a little bit deeper to a few of those. Starting with, I know that, again, this does vary by state, but some states were discussing considering child welfare workers and child protection workers as first responders and emergency responders. What would you say, given the role that child welfare social workers and workers still have to sometimes enter homes if there's a risk to the child? How would you say the child welfare agencies are ensuring the safety of their workforce?

[00:06:38] Yeah, this is a huge challenge, especially in the early days of the pandemic when there wasn't enough protective gear for workers or for families and there wasn't a lot of guidance or policies for how to do this. And so it was difficult for workers to go into family's home and for families to even let people into their homes in this environment. And many states, as you mentioned, didn't have that designation of child welfare workers as essential employees. And so we were really pleased to see that the Children's Bureau had a call to action, really encouraging states to make that designation and provide that necessary protective gear for the child welfare workforce. But it's been a real struggle and it's been very uneven across the country, with some states and jurisdictions moving more quickly than others on this. So we were hearing stories about, for example, child welfare workers being given protective gear to handle the families that they were going to visit but didn't have any for themselves and really being asked to put themselves and their own families at risk by going into other people's homes and doing investigations and doing

visits. So there's been a lot more of a push in, more of an effort to ensure that everybody has the protections they need and protocols around how to conduct investigations and how to conduct visits while protecting themselves and the families they are working with and also maintaining social distance.

[00:08:00] Absolutely. And so I know one of the ways that you just talked about when you first started talking about the challenges too is really seeing agencies shifting to more virtual work spaces in the work that they're doing with families. Can you say a little bit about how agencies are managing this?

[00:08:17] Yeah, absolutely. This crisis has reminded me so much of the old saying that necessity is the mother of invention. And many agencies have been trying to implement protocols and policies for a number of years to make the shift to allow a more mobile workforce. So allow more flexibility with child welfare workers whose jobs are oftentimes largely out in field. They're out conducting investigations and visiting families. And so having to be in an office setting in an agency during office hours isn't sometimes conducive to the way that they need to do their work. So to improve the culture and climate of and manage the intense workload, child welfare agencies have been trying to move to a more mobile workforce. But there's a lot of adaptive challenges and technical challenges associated with this, including ensuring that everyone has the right knowledge and that their support for workers who are working outside the office and also just even trusting that people are getting their work done when they're not physically in the office. And so while agencies have taken years to implement these policies, all of a sudden this pandemic hits and they have to do it right now, immediately. And everybody across the country, all of a sudden, agencies just shut down and were forced to make this change. And it's been amazing to see the innovations that happen in a really short period of time, that these problems seem insurmountable are really not. We can do this. And so, again, in the beginning, getting staff equipped with laptops, with Internet access was definitely the biggest challenge. And I will say for public and travel agencies in more rural areas, access to broadband Internet is still an urgent need and a real problem. And then, of course, the next issue was providing operational support to staff and the guidance for how you even do this job. And you alluded to some of that in your last question with how do you do this job safely, how do you get protective equipment to all of your workforce? How do you actually conduct investigations and home visits virtually and safety and risk assessments? So child welfare leaders had to figure out all of these things and how to also provide emotional support to their staff who were all of a sudden cut off from peers, coping with a collective anxiety and fear that really was gripping the nation, especially in the early days of this pandemic, and really still there's high levels of anxiety about when this was going to end and how this is going to end and what this looks like. So there's a lot of challenges to moving to a virtual workforce. I will also say that the majority of child welfare workforce across the nation is female and in their 30s and 40s. So many have young children or school age children at home. And so they're all of a sudden juggling work and parenting, which, as you know, can be a huge challenge. Agencies have implemented so many strategies to support the virtual workforce, including how to provide virtual supervision, how to conduct virtual meetings using technology, or Zoom or Microsoft teams or other platforms conducting individual one on one meetings and unit meetings and team meetings and checking videos. So all of a sudden moving to a virtual platform was just the norm. And we really actually heard a lot of positive feedback from workers that they actually liked working virtually. There was a lot of benefits to it. And connecting with one another in some ways was less of a challenge than they had anticipated.

[00:11:34] Well, that is good to hear that some folks in different agencies have really been supporting the workforce and that the kind of the front line in some ways is finding some maybe silver linings to some of the work that they're doing, some of the innovations that have really taken place. I know that through NCWWI, the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, has also developed some resources. Are there any of those resources that you might want to highlight that might be helpful to agencies right now?

[00:11:59] Yes. National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, the acronym is NCWWI, has developed and curated lots of resources and you can find them on our NCWWI website at www.NCWWI.org. And in fact, last week we finished the final webinar in a six part series on supporting the virtual workforce. And you can find these on our website, and they include sessions on virtual supervision, well-being, physical and emotional safety, how to convert classroom training to online training, how to coach remotely and using social media and technology to engage families. And we've just had an overwhelming response. We've had thousands of child welfare workers nationally and internationally watch the webinars live and access them through Facebook Live. And again, as I said, you can access them on our website. So we do encourage folks to go check those out because there's lots of great information and resources in those.

[00:12:52] Yeah, I would reiterate that, too. I know the agencies that I work with, as well as students and child welfare have really found those to be a valuable resource right now. And again, very timely as agencies are learning on the fly right now as they're responding to this pandemic. So I think those are really great resources. The other thing that I want to move us to now and that you started talking about earlier is thinking about, of course, this is impacting the workforce in many significant ways, but obviously also impacting the families. You mentioned things like family courts closing and how that might impact permanency and things that were in place, maybe placement moves. How would you say that agencies and workers are supporting families, you know, through staying connected or through some of those processes that you mentioned? How do you think agencies and workers are supporting those connections right now for children and families?

[00:13:44] Yeah, that's a great question. So many really creative and inventive ways that agencies are looking to support meaningful connections with families. And from the beginning just calling families on the phone to check in and see how they were doing, are they safe, what do they need, we've seen formal safety assessment tools that are developed and the specific questions related to Covid-19 and things that families really need immediately. We've seen workers meeting with families and children outside on the lawn with face masks and social distancing. Finding any ways that they can maintain those connections. But really, overall, there's just been a huge increase in workers using social media and technology as tools to stay engaged with families. So I would say in general, the child welfare workforce is overall getting a crash course in digital literacy, what's out there and how to best use those tools, how to ensure privacy and how to create good policy and practice guidelines to sort of guide this for. So workers are using regular video conference channels, like I mentioned before, Zoom or Microsoft or WebEx to move face to face visits that they conduct with families to virtual formats and also to help engage and keep those connections between children and their parents. And so there's been a lot of learning really quick and a lot of great tools and resources that are out there to help guide how to ensure that children can stay connected to their families. It is so traumatizing for kids who are in out-of-home care to separated from their families and their loved ones and their friends and sometimes their siblings. And so when you are not able to have those visits it can be creating additional trauma for children. And so it was a high priority to find a way to make sure that we had these connections virtually. And we've just seen so many

creative ways to do this that have come out of this. For example, using Facetime to allow children to check in with parents and less of a formal visitation structure, but just periodically throughout the day, perhaps before bedtime or parents to read them stories. Lots of strategies for how to engage very young children through very short video meetings where they can sing songs and read books together and bubbles and Playdough and all sorts of ways to engage even very young children in digital ways. So we've seen lots of creative strategies and innovations emerge and lots of great resources out there for child welfare workers. There's lots of different apps out there and platforms that folks can use. Like with everything else there's a learning curve to it. But what we're hearing is that some of these innovations that are happening right now might stick around and they might be sustainable. So even when we're able to resume face-to-face visits, we've learned that there's other ways to connect families together when they're separated.

[00:16:32] And I think you mentioned that before, that part is actually kind of exciting to me as well to see that because child welfare agencies have this very delicate balance of ensuring safety and also well-being at the same time of families and children that I think sometimes maybe were slow to adopt some of these new technologies. But I think as parents and families and agencies, foster parents, as everyone sees the benefit of enhancing some of those meaningful connections, perhaps we'll see some of those innovations stick around, which I think can be really exciting, especially, as you said, for children who have been separated from their families, how traumatic that experience is, to really find ways to help them stay connected to their parents and other family members is really exciting.

[00:17:17] I agree. And children and young adults are much more adept and accustomed to using digital platforms, and social media are ready to connect with each other. And so expanding on these platforms makes a lot of sense. And oftentimes, I think the way that we do family visits, bringing people together in kind of an artificial setting, it's sometimes hard to engage in connections that way. So having these other additional ways to support that interaction when families are separated, I think it could be a really sustainable innovation.

[00:17:51] I'm really impressed that agencies have really stepped up during this pandemic to really find innovative ways to balance the safety of their workforce. Really tried to support their workforce in this new environment, including a virtual environment. But I know, as I mentioned, kind of thinking more about children and families. I know that there's also been a lot of discussion about current concerns about underreporting of child maltreatment, particularly as children are not going to school, families are kind of stuck at home together. What might child welfare agencies and communities in general do to help ensure the safety and well-being of children during the pandemic?

[00:18:34] Yeah, you're absolutely right. We've seen reports of child abuse and neglect fall anywhere between 20 and 70 percent through the month of March. And the general feeling is it's mainly because mandated reporters who generally contact the agency with concerns of child abuse and neglect just don't have eyes on kids right now. So teachers, nurses, doctors, day care providers, those folks who are interacting with kids in their daily lives just aren't there. And we've seen an uptick in several states of young children being admitted to hospitals with serious injuries, which is an indicator that child abuse and neglect is occurring, we're just not necessarily getting reports. And so it's creating this situation where child welfare workers, their caseloads are lower than ever. But that's not necessarily because child abuse and neglect isn't really happening. And there's a fear that if states start to open up, we're going to see a rapid rise in cases. And what does that mean in

terms of caseloads and the response needed by child welfare agencies, that child welfare is really going to need to work in partnership with community providers and other agencies to figure out very quickly how to meet the needs of families who are really struggling in so many ways with this pandemic in terms of rising unemployment and financial hardship and all of the other stressors that we know can just really exacerbate the risk of family violence in general and child abuse or maltreatment.

[00:20:00] So I was going to ask about that as well. Are there other dynamics that might be impacting children, families right now? You mentioned family violence. I know there are certainly concerns around interpersonal violence, domestic violence. Are there other issues that you have seen experts, scholars, agencies, talk about that might also be exacerbated right now with the pandemic?

[00:20:23] I think there is a feeling overall that as families experience more stressors and more hardship that there's higher risk for all of these things that you're mentioning, higher risk for domestic violence and substance abuse and suicide risk that all of these behavioral manifestations of just the incredible amount of stress and hardship that we always see in these underserved communities. And we're seeing more acutely with the Covid-19 economic tsunami that unfortunately we're still likely are at the very beginning.

[00:20:56] So speaking of particularly hard hit communities, we know that as Covid data continues to come out in states and counties, there have been disparities that are coming out, not just in who's contracting the disease, but also particularly high disparities in fatalities, Covid cases, and this is particularly true for some African-American and Native American communities in the US. Are there any considerations for child welfare agencies as they continue to respond to the pandemic, especially given that these are the same communities that are already overrepresented in the child welfare system?

[00:21:33] Yeah, that's a great question. Far from being the great equalizer, Covid-19, has really shined a spotlight on these really deep seated inequities in our society and our health care system for communities of color and underserved communities and tribal communities. So we see now that African-American and Native Americans are dying from Covid-19 at much higher rates than white Americans. And this pandemic just has exposed weaknesses in our healthcare system, including access and availability of care. And these communities, as I said before, are much more likely to be impacted by the economic hit that we're now facing, so rising unemployment and homelessness, lack of health insurance and poverty and hunger. And it's important that child welfare, as they respond to families in this crisis, to be mindful that most of the families who come to the attention of child welfare are those that are facing these issues. And child welfare needs to be able to work in a coordinated way with other agencies and community providers to support families to mitigate these risks and prevent family violence. And there's just no way to do this alone. Child welfare is, by design, orchestrated to respond to allegations of abuse and neglect. And there's an urgency now, I think even more than ever, to work in tandem with community partners, to be able to provide supports for families to prevent violence and keep children safely in their homes. And Covid-19, I believe, can and should really be an accelerator for early efforts of states and jurisdictions to implement prevention programs. There's already been a big push for this as part of the Family First Services Prevention Act, and hopefully this can drive those changes much faster.

[00:23:20] Absolutely. I think that that's really a great reminder and a great call that many of these issues that we're facing that are really being highlighted within this Covid pandemic really do require a coordinated complex response from across multiple systems

and agencies. So I think that that's really a great reminder as well. Is there anything else that you would like to say about the impact of Covid on child welfare systems that we haven't covered at this point?

[00:23:48] You know, I will just say that social workers, and particularly child welfare workers, are trained and accustomed to dealing with crisis. And we have just seen such strength and resiliency across the nations of our child welfare workforce in response to this crisis. It's just amazing how quickly they mobilize and figure out innovative ways to meet the needs of their workforce and the needs of families that they serve. I've been just so amazed and inspired by stories of just dedicated child welfare workers who have responded to this crisis of calm and compassion and a commitment to continuing just to care for children, even at the risk of their own health and safety, their families come first. And their commitment to this work and their jobs and the families that they serve and their social work values is incredibly commendable. And, you know, we don't often like to use the language "heroes" because sometimes when we do so, we forget that these are human beings that we need to protect and take care of, too. But I find the collective action of the child welfare workforce to really be truly heroic. I didn't want to end this interview without mentioning the way that we've seen child welfare step up.

[00:24:58] Absolutely. I would definitely second those words of appreciation and really acknowledgment of just the tremendous work from child welfare workers, supervisors and agency leaders. I agree that they have really stepped up in this time of global pandemic and crisis and really brought their skills to bear here. So I would absolutely agree with that. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

[00:25:21] I don't think so. I just want to thank you for inviting me to have this conversation with you today and being able to talk about these important issues and all that's going on in child welfare in response to the pandemic. So thank you.

[00:25:33] Yeah. Thank you, Robin. It's really been a pleasure to talk with you about this really compelling topic, and really I think sharing some important information that can hopefully help support agencies as they continue to do this important work. So thanks very much for your time today.

[00:25:47] You've been listening to Dr. Robin Leake discuss child welfare and Covid-19 on inSocialWork. Stay well, everyone.

[00:26:04] 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 Resource Center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.