

Washington, D.C., and the Local Child Welfare Professional

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Rafael Lopez, Associate Commissioner, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

[00:00:00]: [MUSIC]

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends, and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work, to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:33]: Well thank you for taking time to join us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. I'm Tom Oates with Information Gateway and this, this is a special episode. We're joined by Rafael Lopez, the commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Now, Commissioner Lopez was appointed actually by President Obama and confirmed by the United States Senate.

So in his role, Commissioner Lopez leads the Federal organization that partners with State, local, tribal, and other federal agencies to improve the overall health and wellbeing of our nation's children and families. So today we're making the connection between what happens in Washington D.C., and the work you do every day. Now Commissioner Lopez -- to give you a bit of a background -- previously worked at the White House where he served as a senior policy advisor in the Office of Science and Technology Policy within the Executive Office of the President. And because he kind of had dual roles here, which is pretty unique, he also worked with the Domestic Policy Council. So the commissioner also had a number of years in his background working in youth and family services. At the local level he started his work in California, where among other roles he served as the founding executive director of First Five Santa Cruz County which focuses on services and education to support the first five years of life for children in Santa Cruz County, California. Now on the east coast he's also worked, he's served as president and CEO of the Family League of Baltimore and as an associate director for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We sat down in his office and talked about the importance of what's happening on the front lines. And so I'd like you to pay some close attention to his passion for not settling for the status quo and what flipping the script means for child welfare. This was a great conversation, we're really excited to bring this to you, so why wait? And let's get right to it.

00:02:27 [MUSIC]

TOM OATES [00:02:30]: Commissioner Lopez, welcome to the podcast.

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:02:32]: Thank you Tom, thank you for having me.

TOM OATES [00:02:33]: So, so much work in child welfare is done on the front lines, at the local, the state, the county agencies. Where is that connection between your office here in Washington and what goes on, on the front lines of child welfare?

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:02:48]: So that's a great question Tom, at the end of the day all of us have to keep up to speed with what's happening on the ground. I have said countless times as I have traveled the country in this role that the local work is the national work. What is happening on the ground, in real time, every single day is what's shaping the lives of countless children, youth and families who are involved in child welfare. So at the end of the day it's really about the local work and really understanding that and keeping connected to it in meaningful ways.

TOM OATES [00:03:15]: So how do you keep connected to all that work?

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:03:18]: So there's lots of ways I think that we all do it and lots of ways that I specifically and personally do it. I think that one, you have to be constantly vigilant about keeping in touch with people. At all levels of leadership roles. From state commissioners and state secretaries to mid-level managers to supervisors to front line social workers. And in every single one of those scenarios whether it's in a tribal community or a county or a state or a city making sure that we are keeping connected.

And so one of the things I do every single week in my role, sometimes informally or mostly informally, sometimes very formally, is make sure that I'm talking to all these various people in different levels. Understanding what is going on, what can we do better, how can the federal government be a better partner? It may be, it may come from a clipping that I read about, and I'm curious about what is happening in a particular part of the country.

It might be a letter that we receive or an email or a phone call from a leader from across the country that we follow up on. And I also get a lot from simply visiting people in the work itself. From everything from more formal ride alongs where I'm literally side by side by someone doing the work in the field or having conversations with teams within counties and states and really trying to have a better understanding of what's happening on the ground.

TOM OATES [00:04:36]: So what's the biggest takeaway you're hearing from all those voices across the country that you're able to then turn around and go you know what, we can affect this and where can I implement change that's going to be seen on the ground level?

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:04:49]: So I think there's lots of ways to approach this. I think one of them is the fact that we have to be responsive and agile as a federal government. And that's not always been the course of our history. One can't dictate change at the most basic and most fundamental level in the community. We can create structures, we can create rules, we can deliver guidance and provide frameworks.

These are all important tools of the federal government. And you know I should note here it's not that these aren't important, but the change that happens that ultimately will be impacted, felt at the local community level, is really the changes brought about by people doing the work. They have to believe that the children, youth, and families that they are serving have within them the power and the capacity to do extraordinary things in those lives. No one wants to be in the child welfare system by choice, no one does.

I haven't met a single person across the country who says that's why they're in this work. It's deeply rooted in the fact that they believe that all children, youth, and families have the ability to do extraordinary things with their lives. And so, part of it is really making that come to life and understanding that regardless of your role or your title you have extraordinary ability and power to influence change.

And you see that most basically because when the child welfare system is actually engaged in a family's life they have the power to either help that family or in some cases destroy the family. And that, that ability to make those kinds of judgement calls is not something we should take lightly ever. So if we were, if we were to divorce ourselves or not be fully engaged in the work in the community the question would be asked, we should be asked is well then what are we doing here?

It is really this continuum of constant engagement, conversation, learning, reiterating, trying to figure out how to do our work better because the results speak for themselves in child welfare Tom, and the results in child welfare for those that come into contact with our systems are, continue to be quite dismal. And so I don't think anybody enters this work because they simply want to continue the status quo. They enter their work because they want to bring about the dramatic change that the children, youth, and families in our country deserve.

TOM OATES [00:07:03]: And something I don't know if many people who are listening to this really would, would understand or maybe have the perception of but you've actually gone on ride alongs, you've experienced that front line level to get a sense. What were the big takeaways that you got from those?

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:07:19]: Sure, sure. They've been different in different parts of the country. You know, gosh there's so much that I learned in those moments but I think it also ties into sort of what I've seen my whole career. I've worked on children, youth, and families issues my entire life and career and if there's one consistent theme it's that when families struggle to make ends meet and when they struggle to provide for their children and their youth it is a struggle that is held across the country. You know, and I think that I've learned a lot from watching different people do their work differently. So for example, I was in one ride along here in the city of Washington D.C. and as we were riding over to the family's home we were talking a lot about what happens when a call comes in to a child welfare system. Sort of who handles that call, how is it dispatched? What is the research that's done as to whether or not that family has had an interaction previously with the child welfare system?

And in the course of you know pulling up to the home we engage in a conversation around the lack of time that social workers get to spend actually doing deep prevention work, of really helping families because at the end of the day they go from crisis to crisis. And the most basic things are the amount of time they spend filling out paperwork. The amount of forms they have to fill out, the amount of forms that they fill out over and over.

The amount of time that they actually have to then take the written notes that are oftentimes on the backs of papers and then bring it back to the office to write a case file and one has to ask oneself why is it that in so many other fields across the country we have seen dramatic technological innovations and revolutions throughout the way we use technology to do our work yet the child welfare or the social services field remains behind the curve on these issues.

And in that moment we were talking about just the transcription of the interviews that the social worker does and was about to do with me at her side and the hours it would take. But imagine using you know voice recording systems that are already in existence and what would happen if the voice recording systems were to translate you know the notes that they actually heard and/or that the social worker did privately and immediately transformed it into a word document. And what if that word document was uploaded into the various systems that are captured, that are built to capture the information?

These kinds of conversations with social workers both help me better understand, help us better understand how important being in touch with our field is at every moment of every time as much as possible. You know that was one example, but then when we actually went into the home and started

talking about the challenges that this particular family was facing, one of the things that came up was how a social worker provides essentially referrals and supports.

And in the context of having a conversation with the family and there were any number of things that the social worker at that moment in time could have said here, you know immediately, here is a way we can help you connect to X or here is a way we can connect you to Y and when we later on debriefed on that portion of the conversation I was struck by the fact that yet again we have all these rich resources in the community and on a handheld or a smart phone the social worker could have had at her disposal countless connections to resources.

And the deeper we got into the conversation the more we realized that in fact even though the D.C. system has made extraordinary advances in the use of technology overall, how we can think about D.C. as an example of being willing to do different things and willing to test new ideas and how that can be infused in everything we do.

TOM OATES [00:11:16]: Before you took on the position you have now you worked over at the White House and you kind of had a unique role because you didn't really have one role. Explain that to me.

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:11:25]: Sure, sure. I got to serve as a senior policy advisor in two different teams at the White House. One was the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and the other was with the Domestic Policy Council. And in, I was a bridge if you will between two policy councils of the White House and the Executive Office of the President. And the way in which I built those bridge, bridges was around children, youth, and families.

And so really thinking about what are the connections between the federal government, non-profit organizations or the social sector, state and local systems, and how do we use technology innovation to really advance our own thinking about the way we serve the most vulnerable Americans in this country. And, and one of the things that was clear was that we have seen such dramatic changes in how technology and innovation is applied to other fields.

I mean the scientific field for example, precision medicine, being able to really closely diagnose and be able to support a person who has cancer or who has any number of diseases. We have used technology and innovation to think about our exploration of space and when you think about space or medicine why don't we have in that same category the most vulnerable children, youth, and families? And it's not that people aren't thinking about it at all or don't want to do something about it.

It's just that the human services field and the social sector writ large has not been able to catalyze the same kind of innovation that we would like to see and we would hope to see in this space. So for example, earlier we talked about you know a social worker being able to dictate into a smart phone or be able to sort of translate interviews you know quickly and easily. Why shouldn't, why should a social worker spend most of their time filling out paper and filling out forms, whether it's in paper or online versus providing the prevention services that are desperately needed for families?

And so if technology can be one of those tools, we should use it more regularly and more consistently. Technology is one lever, it's certainly not an answer, it will not solve the nation's problems on children, youth, and families but it is a tool and a lever that extraordinarily powerful to actually accelerate the change we hope to see in the field. And one only need look at federal requirements around capturing data information and case level information that ultimately is rolled up and fed up, and rolled up into our federal reports.

We see them in things like our AFCARS reports, the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System. We see it in what will become CCWIS, Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System. So the data that is put into systems are not mere data points. They tell the stories of the children, youth, and families that are represented in child welfare system. Each single point is not an obscure point, but actually lifts up a story of whether or not a child has been reunified with another family member.

Whether or not they've been able to be transferred to another school in a timely way, what happens to that child in the course of their time in the child welfare system. So again, technology and innovation can bring those, those fruits to bear in a way that is extraordinarily powerful. Most importantly the ability to integrate and to share information between systems. Anyone who knows anything about child welfare in this country knows that multiple people are involved.

Countless systems, departments, people from you know the courts to you know in some cases tribal communities to state systems, county systems, education systems. All these very big systems are involved in the lives of family. Why wouldn't we use technology and innovation to make sure that the family doesn't have to tell their story over and over? That with their active consent and with their active permission to use their information across systems, to share information and to better deliver services. So that if a child were to come into the child welfare system and they had to be removed from their family for whatever reason that their stay in foster care would be rare, would be brief, and potentially one time only and a golden ticket. What if that's what it meant? What if it meant that you could get all the services you needed and you actually were better off, that's not the system we have right now, and technology, innovation, and bridging our domestic policy work with technology innovation is one of the I think the most interesting things that we're going to have to think even deeper about. And to act on with urgency and with agility in the next era of child welfare work in this country.

TOM OATES [00:16:03]: Do you think there is a need for the permission to innovate because there's this "we've always done it this way and this is the way the system has always worked for us and so we're going to stay with it because change can be scary" especially when you're dealing with people's lives. Is there a mindset that we hope can change to where it's okay to try something new?

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:16:24]: That's a profound question Tom because I sort of chuckle because let's be clear about what we already have. So what are the outcomes or the results for children and youth who end up in child welfare in this country? Overwhelmingly over the course of the last decades, even though there's been some improvement and there are certainly outliers of greater success than others, overwhelmingly the data is pretty clear.

Number one, a child who enters a child welfare system is most likely not to graduate from high school. Two, that child is likely to grow up and not go on to receive an associates or a bachelor's degree. Roughly three percent of all former foster youth in our system receive a bachelor's degree. Third, within the first few years of aging out of the foster care system they are more likely to be jobless and to be homeless.

We see a direct pipeline of young people who have gone through the child welfare system who often times end up in the juvenile justice system or the homelessness system or in prison. And the data that we see from state to state is overwhelmingly painful to look at. So why is it that that is acceptable? My answer is that it's not, it is completely unacceptable. We need only dig deeper in some of the data of some of the most marginalized communities.

So for example, our family youth services bureau recently released a report on youth homelessness. And you know from eleven cities across the country and on every measure the data was, was alarming. So for example we knew that the vast majority of the young people on the street who were homeless, who had contact with our street outreach program, were more likely to be robbed and beaten and raped.

We know for a fact that over 50% of the young people on the street right now have had some involvement with the child welfare system. We see that over and over with people who are in prisons, who themselves have been in the foster care system. Why is it that we can actually draw those

connections and those lines so clearly after decades of investment, after billions of dollars spent? So the question should be why is that acceptable? Why is not trying something new so scary and dangerous? Are there lives at stake? You bet there are. Are the consequences immense? Absolutely. Will we make mistakes as human beings? Without question. But the urgency is clear, which is that what we've been doing does not work. Or depending on how you want to frame it, it just works well, just fine which is the system works as it was intended to set up, as it was intended to work. And you know, one can look at this from multiple frameworks, from multiple philosophical perspectives, from multiple political perspectives.

My sense is that point me to a place in the country where it works well and let's figure out what, how to learn where it's working well and to scale that. That's not the case right now in foster care in this country. And so do adults hate change? Without question, it is scary. Adults are resistant to change, but it really at the end of the day is not about the adults. It is about the children, youth, and families in the system.

And if you don't want to bring about dramatic change that delivers better results for children, youth, and families then you shouldn't be working in this field, period.

TOM OATES [00:19:36]: So there's an approach you're, that if anyone's read anything that you've either said or published the term "flipping the script". Which from what I'm gathering is a change in how we approach, a change in how we view and a change in how we apply services. Where does this you know, idea to push towards innovation, to change what is going on now, where does that start from and what does flipping the script look like?

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:20:02]: Sure. So, yeah I think the term, first of all you know President Obama uses the term regularly and it's a term that I really like because what it's really about is changing the narrative. It's about you know, it's a term that's often used in informal conversations you know, we're going to change what we're doing, we're going to turn something on its head. And the whole idea behind that is one can't look at the trends over the years, even when we had a decline in the number of kids in care and say that it's, that that's okay.

Because the idea would be that we, we accept what we see coming into our system and that is you know that in fact most of the co-occurrence factors that end up contributing to why a child is removed are issues that are common to our, to everyone across the country that cross racial and class and cultural boundaries. For example, domestic violence and the immense amount of violence that our children are exposed to, that our young people are exposed to that is, that is a running thread through the reason for removals.

Second, mental health issues. The deep challenges of families struggling with their own mental health. Third the issue of substance abuse. Whether it's opioids or meth or crack or designer drugs are we are seeing across the country, these three factors are not new to child welfare. They have been in existence and with us for, perhaps since the dawn of time. But the question is do we believe, do we believe that we can actually change what we're seeing coming into our system?

The answer should be yes, yes we can. Yes we can change what we see. We don't have to accept that and if we actually focus on prevention when a family is first experiencing the crisis or first experiencing the challenge that is when we should be intervening not once things are so bad that it requires the government to intervene and to remove a child. That in and of itself is traumatic. And so of course, I shouldn't say of course.

I would imagine people want to flip the script on this narrative. It is a tired narrative in this country and it has not worked. What the narrative could be or what we could imagine it could be is that whoever you are, wherever you come from, whatever your family, whoever you love, that you are a family who

could deeply be connected to services when you need help. And that they could be any number of kind of, of preventive kind of services.

So that you can keep your family unified and intact. And there are models of that that are happening in different parts of the country. The question we should be asking is why is it that we can continue to spend the kind of federal money and the kind of state and local money we do on a system that is broken? That should be the question and I feel like at the end of the day I, I get to witness firsthand the consequences of spending money the way we have.

The president's budget for every single year of President Obama's term has tried to flip the script on investment. To move us from a crisis oriented investment to a preventative structure. To expand the kinds of prevention services, to make sure that we have the right kinds of mental health supports and substance abuse supports and the right kind of investments in domestic violence because at the end of the day we believe that, that bringing an end to domestic violence really is possible.

You know bringing an end to the addiction of drugs that tear apart families is possible. And I would encourage people to sort of ask themselves do they believe that? And if the answer is no they don't, then what would it take to get there? Because you have to be driven by something that's something that's larger than yourself. You have to be driven by this fundamental belief that children, youth, and families who, who are victims of these various you know challenges ultimately are survivors.

They are able to through their own perseverance and their own grit and their own sense of self-worth able to survive some of the most extraordinary and painful experiences that no child, youth, and family should experience. So you know when I think about your question about flipping the script, for me it's an easy answer which is that what we have is unacceptable and we should be together as a country talking about what more we can do to invest early on in the life of children, youth, and families such that they never have to enter the child welfare system.

TOM OATES [00:24:41]: That's a big, daunting, piece of change.

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:24:44]: It is.

TOM OATES [00:24:44]: We're talking about investments or when we're talking about you know the structure and really at the federal level. So what can be done at the local level and just those small community areas to help bring about that change?

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:24:58]: Absolutely. You know, just, I guess it was a couple of weeks ago we hosted the first ever White House foster care and technology hackathon. And one of the things that struck me about pulling together people from vastly different sectors, technologists, engineers, social workers, you know state level secretaries, commissioners, non-profits, foundations. This sort of constellation of people from different sectors were brought together.

And we had both sort of a policy hackathon as well as a literal technology hackathon. Apps that could be used you know directly to support children, youth, and families. More than anything it was to model that we can in fact in this sector and in this space innovate. We can, we can be thoughtful within even you know whatever time we have, hours, 18 hours, 24 hours, like the hackers did or through the course of time that everyone has the ability to bring about change.

Why that matters is that there is a point in time during our gathering where a young woman who I deeply respect and admire, she's a former foster, I have her permission to use her name, her name is Emmie Brunelle and she stood up during the conversation and she reflected on how excited she was to be part of this conversation but was struck by many of the comments that were sort of water cooler comments.

That were things like “Is this really possible to do?” “This is a pipe dream, bringing this kind of level of change to child welfare is not so easy to do, you know.” And what she said, what struck me was essentially a version of when she hears people who are powerful, who hold these roles, who are gatekeepers to these systems, whether it’s directly child welfare or the funding or the philanthropic resources or others.

That when she hears them talk about a pipe dream and she hears them talk about how impossible it is that at the end of the day what she really hears is that they’d rather have a broken system and to keep things as status quo than to believe that she has any hope of possibility to grow an extraordinary life after foster care. And when she shared that with the audience, and I’m sure I’m not exactly getting every word that she said.

But I thought it was one of the most powerful moments in the gathering because here’s this young woman that by her own grit and her own perseverance and her own willingness to stick it out as the system -- quote unquote -- pushed hard on her to fail. That you know this is a young woman who didn’t choose to enter the foster care system, you know choices were made by other adults that landed her in the child welfare system. So when she hears or when I hear people say that’s impossible, that’s a pipe dream, there’s no way we can bring that to child welfare.

There’s a part of me that simply says well then get out of the way. Because we don’t need you in this space. What we need in the nation’s child welfare system are people who are willing to be risk takers. Who are willing to be innovators, who are willing to make mistakes and step up for a system that’s better than what we have. And are there consequences for making mistakes? Of course there are. We see those consequences. But think about not, what the consequence of not acting is.

And those are the headlines we read about nationally. When a child dies a gruesome death you know, the national media rallies. You know, we want off with their head for the head of that system. That’s one of the first things that are called for is that person should be fired and then they trickle down to all the various people that should be fired. Well you can fire all those people but the question we should be asking is, has the system been changed?

Has there been a fundamental shift of the culture of the people who work there and in the way in which we conduct our business on behalf of the nation’s most vulnerable children, youth, and families? And that’s at the heart of your question Tom. So when I think about Emmie or I think about all the former foster youth that are deeply a part of my own personal and professional continued learning and growth, that’s who comes to mind.

There isn’t a day in this role where I don’t think about one of them. And I ask myself what would they do? Would they be pushing the way we are right now and the answer is without question. Because they’ve lived that life and they understand that life and so many of us in our own lives, very personally have been impacted by these systems and who would want that for any other child in America? I don’t think anybody does.

TOM OATES [00:29:25]: So then you’ve got the professionals that are coming in touch with all the Emmie’s out there. Where do we go to empower them for, for that spark that many of them already have.

RAFAEL LOPEZ: [00:29:39]: Right, right.

TOM OATES [00:29:39]: But at times may feel like I’ve got to fit within this box or I’ve got to go within these steps as opposed to trying to reach for that pipe dream.

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:29:48]: Right. You know Tom, I think that at the end of the day because the consequences are so real and so large in child welfare I would argue that it’s a false choice. I don’t

believe that people who are at various levels of leadership in the system, and let's just in this case focus on the front line social worker, they're not powerless. They actually have extraordinary power.

And if one doesn't voice their concerns then what we're really saying is silence ultimately is acceptable in the child welfare system. Silence is what has gotten us into this place that we're in now, which is that as we are seeing an increase again in the number of kids in our nation's foster care system after a steady decline, that we are again linked to a variety of co-occurrence factors.

Whether it's domestic violence again or mental health or substance abuse issues as three of several examples. The question would be is silence acceptable and the answer is it's not. So then where do you have to turn to? One you turn to your very colleagues, you know, finding like people who are willing to have a conversation with you. It's as basic as saying hey Tom, I was just out on this ride, how would you handle this situation?

You know there are ways in which you can be thoughtful, informal, and creative in how you engage your colleagues in problem solving. You know one of the things that the, the things we do with I have a series of senior policy advisors and when we sit around the table one of the first things we do is we take turns actually dissecting a case and we call it case consultation. And under ten minutes provide active advice to a colleague who is struggling with a particular issue at work that's live.

The idea being that whether it's ten minutes or ten hours or ten days there's always a way in which we can help each other. So first turning the people that are right around you. Second you know turning to your managers and your leaders. Have you thought about this Tom, what about this idea? How might we solve this Tom? You know whatever the, whatever the structure is finding other people that are willing to engage with you as your partners. Third, you know looking outward from the system. What about this vast network of the social sector that often is directly interacting with tribal, county, and state systems.

There are tons of non-profits who are doing this work, sometimes under contract with counties, states, and tribes. How are they at the table? How are they you know regularly and consistently helping you solve problems? You know fourth, thinking about what trends are happening nationally. Yes, we're all busy, especially people directly on the front lines. But how are we staying connected to what's happening across the country, sometimes what might feel like it's insurmountable or undoable or impossible in your community may not be in others.

What are the lessons learned? You can't just take New York City and plunk it into you know Tulsa, Oklahoma and we wouldn't expect the reciprocal. But what is happening Tulsa or what is happening Manhattan that we can learn about? What is happening you know in the rural south that is or is not working? What is happening tribal communities? So one can look at you know these outliers or bright spots or found pilots if you will that say wow something's really working there Tom, let's figure that out. Sometimes it's a phone call away or an email so what I'm trying to get across here Tom is that you know if you look at it as oh I'm just going to change the whole system you know, wave my magic wand and it's going to happen that's, that's not possible but it is possible to bring about change when you start with what's around you. What control do I have in the case that I'm working on? What resources are available to me? How do I help navigate those? And that change happens within. You have to believe that it's possible.

And I, I approach this work from the perspective that you have to deeply love the children, youth, and families you serve. You have to find in them and you have to see in their faces and in their eyes the worth that they carry which is that who chooses to be in this system? I don't think anybody does. I don't believe anybody does and you have to be able to look them in the eye and believe they have extraordinary potential.

And if you can't do that, I don't think that you should be in the field. I really don't. Because the work that people who are involved in child welfare manage and ultimately have control over is extremely life

changing and it could make or break someone's life so I think it's possible to lean on people in ways that are unexpected because there will be always someone that comes to your side, there just always is. And that's been my experience in my life and career. And I see that even as I travel the country. It's oftentimes in the most informal ways that we help each other and really come up with a new idea.

TOM OATES [00:34:35]: Finally, when you're, when you get those moments to connect with those on the front lines, what that's final message that you want to convey to each one of those folks who are working in the county and the state agencies?

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:34:51]: Well I think the first thing that I would want them to take away is how deeply grateful we are for their work. How profoundly grateful we are for their willingness to try to invest in delivering better results for our nation's children, youth, and families. They don't always get thanked. I think that sometimes in the course of this work we only hear about the tragic headlines, we don't hear about the successes. So what I want people to take away, whatever their role is in this work, just I want them to know how deeply thankful we are for them.

Second I think it's always important that they hear that we are always trying to figure out how to better communicate with all levels of the field. And we want to be responsive, we want to be thoughtful, we want to be proactive versus reactive and in the course of this work in this particular office we have not always been proactive. We have been reactive to a crisis or to an issue.

And they need to hear that we are listening. That we are actually really taking to heart and translating into policy the kinds of suggestions they give us. Third, they need to hear as I said earlier in our conversation that the local work is the national work. They are the ones who are on the ground day to day in their various roles trying to bring about positive changes in families' lives. I think they also need to understand that that they are us and we are them.

That we are human, and that we make mistakes just like they're going to make mistakes and we have to be supportive of each other when we do. We have to be willing to say to someone how can we learn and grow together because the work that we all do is greater than any one of us and the stakes are extremely high for this country. I would say the last thing I would want people to think about who are doing this work in the field is whether or not the system they're working in is good enough for their own children.

And, or their children's children if they're grandparents or if they don't have children just to really, the children, the youth, and families that they see in their lives and their neighborhoods and their community they should be asking themselves is what I'm doing, is the system I'm working in good enough for the people I love? And if the answer is even remotely close to I don't know or maybe or no then the question they should ask themselves is what might my contribution be to transforming the system so that it is good enough for my children and for my children's children.

If we could put ourselves in the shoes of the children, youth, and families who come to us for help and to better understand not only to empathize but to act on what we've learned and to use the data to drive our decisions and to drive our policy making we would be better off as a country. And I think it is only, it is the hands of, of people working at the local level where the change that we seek will happen and will be brought about by people at the local level.

And I think of people like Tabitha and Tamara, you know two social workers who I met and worked with here in Washington D.C. and how deeply committed they are to, to supporting families, to making sure they get the help they need when they need it. They care deeply about the system because they want to make sure that no child really ever has to enter it. And when they do come across their desks or their emails as a case they want to make sure they're getting the family the support they need to thrive.

TOM OATES [00:38:30]: Commissioner Lopez thank you for your time.

RAFAEL LOPEZ [00:38:32]: Thank you.

TOM OATES [00:38:36]: So there you have it. To get a sense of where his passion comes from, I'd encourage you to find the commissioner's senate confirmation testimony from April of 2015, just google it and it's pretty short but it'll give you a great sense of where he's coming from. He's also on Twitter, his handle is @ACYFGOV, G-O-V, @ACYFGOV.

Child Welfare Information Gateway is a service of the Children's Bureau, which is part of the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families so it's our job at Information Gateway to support all the child welfare professionals Commissioner Lopez talked about by connecting them to peer reviewed, vetted, relevant information. And we hope we're providing that to you by hearing from folks like Commissioner Lopez, like folks working in the field who have new ideas or who are learning new information and pass that along to you.

And so I'd also like to let you know that this is your podcast. So if there's something you want to learn from or an office or an agency that's found a new way to work with partners or serve families, just reach us at info@childwelfare.gov and let us know. So make sure you check out some of our other podcast episodes, including getting the perspective from a foster care youth, a former youth in foster care, on engaging youth in foster care and getting more out of them to help work on their case plans and plan towards their future.

We also have podcasts to let you hear about ways local agencies are combatting secondary traumatic stress. And also look for a podcast on tips from the Federal Bureau of Prisons on how to navigate and work with the correctional system to engage and work with incarcerated parents. Just go to childwelfare.gov and search podcasts. Now if you're new to Information Gateway just to let you know we provide new and updated content to help those on the front lines of child welfare, the managers and supervisors, policy makers, and all the related professionals who interact with child welfare.

Along with families and the public too, we connect them to information and resources that span the continuum of child welfare. You can download also the national foster care and adoption directory app. It gives you the contact information for foster care, adoption, and support agencies from across the nation. The app is free and available for Android and iOS and it makes it easy to search and find from your phone so you can help clients and families right there on the spot find the information they need to get support to help children and youth find permanent connections.

Or to help families with that preventative medicine that the commissioner spoke of. So once again, thank you so much for being a part of this community and being a part of this podcast series. We're putting together new episodes so be on the lookout for more great discussions. For now, that wraps up this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates, thanks so much for listening and we'll talk to you next time.

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:41:30]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect those of Information Gateway or the Children's Bureau.