
The Children We Serve - A Personal Story

- Article written by Don Forrester

Sean Milner, Wednesday night's speaker at the Catherine Hershey Award's Banquet at the 2019 CORE National Conference, held the full attention of those in attendance. Sean shared that he was placed as a child in care at the Baptist Children's Village in Mississippi at the age of five. To date, he has the record of being the longest tenured resident in the history of the children's home.



Sean Milner on the right

In reflecting on the length of his stay, he said when you do the math it appears that he was in care at least two years longer than possible. A person doesn't generally know from meeting him that he failed the third and the seventh grades. Consequently, he repeated those grades in school. He suggested that failure never defines a person. It could simply be an opportunity to hit the reset button and do it differently going forward. By the way, that is a good life lesson to note.

I didn't anticipate the comedy routine that the attorney-turned-child care administrator would rely on as he shared his story. Sean's true-to-life experiences from a child's perspective of what it is like to be a kid growing up in a children's home were well received. I laughed until I cried and I cried or was at least teary eyed when parts of his story tugged at my heartstrings.

At the time Sean was a child in care, the Baptist Children's Village in Mississippi was on a very large tract of land with housing for children in a circular pattern across the campus. A couple of years ago when I was in Mississippi, Sean drove me through that campus and recounted for me personal stories and memories associated with almost every home we drove past.

Wednesday night, Sean had an audience filled with administrative staff from children's homes and house parents. What better chance to share his story from a child's perspective with things that those serving children most need to know?

He wove his way into our hearts by sharing some of the kind of dumb things kids on a children's home campus choose to do. What nine-year-old boy hasn't wanted to climb out the window at

night and go to the girl's cottage just to talk? He suggested that the statute of limitations may not have expired, so he changed the names of some of his friends.

The boys never made it inside the girl's cottage, but the girls were making so much fuss over the fact that boys were at the window that they awakened the houseparent. From the outside, they heard the booming voice of the housemother as she was sorting out what was going on. Of course, Sean ran as fast as he could to get away.

What he didn't count on was the metal clothesline that was exactly the same height as the opening of his mouth. His body kept moving forward while his head was stuck in place. He could taste blood in the corners of both sides of his mouth.

Freeing himself from the albatross of entanglement, he rolled down the hill and into places you'd never walk in the daytime. The next morning, he looked like death warmed over. In addition to the injury to both sides of his mouth, his body was totally covered with poison ivy. His housemother wanted to know what happened? Despite his miserable condition, his response was: "I don't know".

Sean's stories and antics were plentiful. How about jumping on a moving train at the age of 12 with a small group of peers to run away from home? What the boys didn't know is that the train was slowing down to stop rather than take them far away.

He shared the story of one houseparent couple that regularly locked all of the kids outside their cottage on Sunday afternoons while they took a nap. It didn't matter how cold or how hot it was outside. The routine was carved in stone. They locked the kids outside. A couple of kids in the cottage revolted and said they weren't going. They hid in the toy closet.

It wasn't long before the kids locked outside saw the door open and heard screaming and cussing. The two kids who'd been left inside lost their cover of protection. So what happened? The two kids asked: "Did you know there was another door to the toy closet? They gone through the door and found stairs leading to the attic. "So, did you hide in the attic?" "Well, not really. We stepped off of the wooden beams and fell through the ceiling". It just so happened, that they fell through the ceiling onto the bed where the cottage parents were taking a nap. Let me simply say, "It proved to be a rude awakening."

The speaker then went back in time and shared his personal story of being three-years-of-age when his father took the family, including all five kids, to a park in California to play. While his mother sat on a park bench holding his youngest brother who was five-days-old, the father opted to "go to pick up lunch" for the family. The father left and never returned.

His father didn't tell his mother that he had checked her out of the hotel or that she didn't have a car or that she didn't have any money. She was a mother alone with five children and not two thin dimes to rub together. She turned to churches and charity for the resources to take the family by train back to her family's home in Mississippi.

By his own admission, Sean doesn't actually remember the experience other than through the mother's recounting of it. He was only three year's old at the time. He does remember the

experience of being five-years-of-age when his mother, living with the guilt and shame of her alcoholism, cried out for help in the only way she knew possible. He remembers the sound of the gunshot as his mother attempted to end her life. He remembered propping her up next to the kitchen cabinet and holding her while his older brother ran two miles to the nearest neighbor's home to call for help.

The speaker said to those in attendance: "There are some things you need to know. You need to know that I did a lot of dumb things as a kid. I did a lot of things that were wrong. You need to know that I didn't need to be reminded of the guilt. I lived with a sense of guilt. I lived with a sense of wrong-doing. As an administrator or houseparent, never forget that kids don't need to be reminded that they are wrong. They already are painfully aware of that reality".

The thing he couldn't understand was the house parents and staff who simply quietly and supportively didn't browbeat him for the wrong in his life, but opted inside to sit quietly with him and simply say with compassion that they were sorry for what he was going through.

He didn't understand their love when he experienced it. Yet the staff that were consistently compassionate are the staff he mostly remembers. They are the staff that made a meaningful difference in his life. They are the staff that provided him with a sense of hope.

As a side note, Sean Milner, President of Baptist Children's Village in Mississippi, was awarded the Administrator of the Year award earlier in the evening. He had no idea that his nomination had been made to the award's committee. Sean left a lucrative law practice to return to Baptist Children's Village to serve as administrator. He is now providing other children the level of compassion and love that he couldn't understand as a child, but it comes naturally to him now as an adult wanting to make a difference in the life of a child from a hard place. Other agency staff, students and honorees recognized at the Catherine Hershey Awards Banquet include:



Evan Gough - Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches

2019 Student of the Year

Dana Watson - Alabama Baptist Children's Homes and Family Ministries

2019 Alumnus of of Year





**Betty and Will Porter - Baptist Children
Homes of North Carolina**

2019 Houseparent Couple of the Year

Odis Cosgrove - St. Joseph's Indian School

2019 Single Houseparent of the Year



Brock Sundall - St. Joseph's Indian School

2019 Educator of the Year



**Tim Brown (Former President of
Methodist Children's Home)**

Lifetime Achievement Award



Other Honorees Receiving an Award from CORE Included:

Dr. Bruce Henderson, 2019 Trustee of the Year - Black Mountain Home for Children

Congressman Greg Stube - 2019 Legislator of the Year



Update: Implementation of FFPSA

Moving Forward – Forever a Resource for Children and Families was the theme for the 2019 CORE National Conference, but the theme is more than that. It is also the resolve of CORE’s membership to figuratively do whatever it takes to continue being a resource for children and families from hard places.

With the resolve to display the highest level of integrity and professionalism, our member agencies have done a myriad of things to continue to be relevant and in line with required legislation:

- Some have retooled programs and have done whatever was necessary to become a QRTP
- Some have downsized the capacity of cottages on their campuses and moved toward operation as a network of foster family homes
- Some have stretched to provide care for sibling groups and are now serving both boys and girls in the same cottages
- Others, not directly impacted by the need for Federal or State dollars, have evaluated what changes are needed to continue providing quality services to children and families from hard places.

No doubt it is to the credit of CORE member agencies that October 1, 2019 has come and gone and none of our member agencies have ceased operation or are making plans to cease being a resource for children needing services.

That is not to say that meeting the specific provisions of the Family First Prevention Services Act has been flawless. The Act as written, including timelines and resources for compliance, have proven an impossibility for even the Federal Government to meet.

Prevention Services

For starters, some of the rhetoric used to promote FFPSA talked about the importance of putting dollars on the front end of service delivery with the intent of negating the need for residential services. In essence, according to provisions of the actual bill, the service delivery process is probably better defined a form of intervention rather than prevention.

In order for a child or family to be eligible for prevention services, the abuse/neglect has to be at a point that the child could be removed from their family because of the severity of the abuse/neglect. Consequently, the bill isn't primarily a forum for prevention services. It is an immediate response to abusive/neglectful harm with the hope of keeping the child in the home.

In addition, in order to spend IV-E dollars for family support services, the services must be evidence based and be rated in one of the following three categories:

- Promising
- Supported
- Well – Supported

Of course, the fourth possible rating category is: “Practice Not Supported”

In addition, States are required to spend at least 50% of the total amount claimed for federal reimbursement for prevention services on “well-supported” programs.

Though the law includes the evidence-based requirement for payment, the Clearing House system for evaluating and rendering a rating has not kept up with the demand.

On July 18, 2019, ACF (Administration for Children and Families) released Program Instructions (PI) related to State Agencies implementing a transitional payments program until the Clearing House can review and rate a program or service, if the state submits sufficient documentation as outlined in the PI (Program Instruction) by October 1, 2021.

According to the instructions: “During the interim period, until the Clearinghouse can conduct the review and rate a program, states must conduct independent systematic reviews of prevention services and programs to complete this documentation. The Clearinghouse will make the final determination about whether a program or service is assigned as promising, supported or well supported.

The Program Instruction includes the statement: “We intend that this process for transitional payments will support ACF’s goal to review programs and services as quickly as possible in the early years of implementation of the Title IV-E prevention program”.

The written reference to “the early years of implementation” suggest that whatever is currently being done is short of what is actually required through the Act.

Residential Services

In terms of residential placement, the law makes no provision for IV-E dollars to be used for the residential care of a child in any setting other than a foster family home or QRTP for treatment services beyond a two-week period. The law also requires that residential admission of a child needing treatment services to a QRTP requires an assessment by a “qualified individual”. By definition, the qualified individual is “a trained professional or licensed clinician who is not an employee of the state agency and who is not connected to or affiliated with any placement setting in which children are placed by the state”.

Reportedly, a waiver process is available to State’s to attest to the professionalism of the qualified individual or clinician and negate the need for the qualified individual to have no affiliation with either the QRTP or the placing agency.

Perhaps anticipating the probable need for the residential piece to take longer, provisions of the law enabled states to request a wavier for up to a three-year period (until October 1, 2023) to restrict residential care of children needing the use of IV-E resources to be placed only in foster family homes or QRTP settings serving children with severe behavioral and emotional health issues. Of course, states requesting a waiver of the residential piece are reportedly not eligible to receive IV-E income for non-residential prevention services.

Initially, based on data collected last year, only six states reported that they were on-line and ready to be fully in compliance by October or November, 2018. Reportedly, fourteen additional states committed to being fully compliant by October 1, 2019.

I think it is safe to suggest that the alleged bi-partisan effort to improve a broken child welfare system has not yet come to fruition. Perhaps, anticipating the probable need for the residential piece to take longer, provisions of the law enabled states to request a wavier for up to a three-year period (until October 1, 2023) to restrict residential care of children needing the use of IV-E resources to be placed only in foster family homes or a QRTP settings serving children with severe behavioral and mental health issues. Of course, states requesting a waiver of the residential piece are reportedly not eligible to receive IV-E income for non-residential prevention services.

Initially, following passage of the budget bill that included provision of FFPSA, only six states reported that they were prepared to be fully in compliance with FFPSA by November 2018.

At the same time, fourteen additional states expressed their intent for being fully in compliance by October 1, 2019 with both the residential provisions and non-residential provisions of FFPSA qualifying for IV-E spending.

If those numbers are still accurate, that leaves 30 States who have delayed implementation of FFPSA beyond the present. Some would suggest that additional modification to the legislation is merited.

Potential QRTP Problem Area With Medicaid Services

Another issue that has recently surfaced relates to a potential problem with the QRTP Classification by Center for Medicaid Services (CMS). Reportedly, the Federal Center for Medicaid Services does not allow institutions for mental disease (IMDs) to receive Medicaid funding for most institutional care for individuals under the age of 65. Institutions are defined as any “hospital, nursing facility, or other institution of more than 16 beds, that is primarily engaged in diagnosis, including medical attention, nursing care, and related services.”

Since QRTPs are required to have 24/7 nursing staff and are only allowed to serve children and youth with “serious emotional or behavioral disorders or disturbances” there is concern that they may be defined as an institution for mental disease by CMS.

Pending Legislation

The State Flexibility and Family First Transitions Act [S. 107/ H.R. 3116] - This bill provides states with the option to extend by two years a child-welfare demonstration project scheduled to end in FY2019.

The Families First Transition and Support Act of 2019 [S. 1376/ H.R. 2702]- This bill was introduced on May 8, 2019 in the Senate by Sen. Brown (OH) and subsequently by Rep. Bass in the House on May 14, 2019.

Synopsis: A bill to amend parts B and E of Title IV of the Social Security Act to eliminate barriers to providing child welfare services for children and youth in need, to provide additional resources to implement programmatic changes necessary to meet the requirements of the Family First Prevention Services Act, and for other purposes.

Families First Transaction Act - This act does not yet have a number, but was drafted by Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich) and Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio). This act identifies funding levels by States to assist with implementation of FFPSA. Reportedly, it also offers assistance to States whose IV-E waiver expired on October 1, 2019. In addition, it also modifies the timeline for provisions associated to ratings for evidence based practices.