

Jerry Milner:

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As Elaine said, I came to the Children's Bureau two years ago. For those of you keeping score, came back to the Children's Bureau. I came here full of hopes, full of dreams about what I could do for child welfare in our country based on my years of experience, based on my insights, my lessons learned over the years and my vision for where I want our field to go. What I never imagined was what the field of child welfare would do for me in this job. Not just as a child welfare professional, but as a human being who cares very deeply about families, about children, about youth, about how we help them or how we hurt them. Because I choose to do my job and to lead from the field listening as many weeks as I possibly can to the voices of children, of youth, of parents, the people who serve them rather than trying to lead by staring at a computer in Washington, DC.

Jerry Milner:

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I have in my mind so many of the stories of people with lived experience that at the same time shake my soul and shape my thinking. These stories move me deeply beyond my ability to articulate. They're instructive, they're powerful. The sample size of these stories that I'm so fortunate to be able to hear, to share is significant and incredibly consistent across the country. David and I almost always open up our meetings, small meetings, large conferences by asking folks in attendance how they believe parents, children, and youth in the child welfare system would describe their experiences. We ask folks to share the words that they think parents and youth would use to describe those experiences. The words most often include things like "overwhelmed," "confused," "overlooked," "unheard," "scared," "ashamed," "unsupported," "angry," "alone." So many others. Most often the words are not positive words, sometimes they are. But taken together, they tell the story of a system that is largely not providing families what they need. A story about a system that's out of balance, one that is funded to separate to families rather than to keep them together and strong.

Jerry Milner:

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Words are powerful, words have meaning. Words have the ability to empower or disempower. Words can show dignity or indignity, words indicate respect or lack of respect. I believe it's time for us to choose a different set of words to use in our work and to create the conditions for families and children to be able to describe their experiences using different words. We have a collective responsibility to do that. We've organized this conference as Elaine has already mentioned, to share as many of those stories as possible because the voices that we must listen to are those that have experienced both the good and the bad of our work. Those stories that I hear in the field and so

many that I've heard this week here have reaffirmed for me a thousand times over, that our mission as a field must be nothing less than strengthening family's ability to care for their children and to thrive in a world that is mostly inhospitable for them and to be clear, that is not our current trajectory.

Jerry Milner:

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Those stories have affirmed for me that a commitment to primary prevention of child abuse and neglect in the communities where families live is the only reasonable, ethical, moral and responsible way to spend our time and our child welfare dollars. And to be clear, that is not what we currently do. The stories have affirmed for me that a wholesale re-imagining of our current definition and our expectations of child welfare must occur. Last Fall, David and I went down to South Carolina to speak to Theresa Raphael's national meeting of our children's trust funds. As always, traveling across the country to give a brief speech it's not a good enough reason to get on an airplane and go there. So we asked for the opportunity as we always do to meet with a group of parents, children, youth being served by community based primary prevention programs. This is just one of probably scores of visits that we've made over these past two years and every single one of them has left an indelible mark on us in their detail.

Jerry Milner:

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I want to paint a picture for you, if you will, of what this South Carolina visit gave us the opportunity to see. We found ourselves in a small room of a community-based prevention and family support program that supported by the South Carolina children's trust fund. I want you to try to picture the faces that were in that room. Five very young mothers and one grandmother. The young mothers were in their late teens, maybe early twenties and they were all in the same incredibly difficult situation. Each one of them had their own different circumstances, but our common challenge united them, each of them were trying to raise babies on their own. They were separated by geography from other family and supports. They were struggling to complete an education and they admitted not having the know how to raise a baby when they learned that they were pregnant.

Jerry Milner:

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Five out of the six women in the room had children who the research tells us are the most vulnerable to child maltreatment and to fatality by maltreatment. That is children under the age of three years old. We know that these women in the room had many, if not most of the risk factors present that would lead so many others like them into the child welfare system, social isolation, youth, inexperience, lack of knowledge on child rearing and child development. Yet not one of their children or

their mothers had made contact with the child welfare agency. Begs the question, why? Why? Because they were connected to critical supports, in this case through at least three different home visiting programs when they took their babies home from the hospital and anything bad had a chance to happen those beautiful, thriving, healthy children because they had access to medical care for themselves and for their babies, and because they had someone to turn to in times of need. They agreed to the help, it was voluntary and no calls were needed to the child protection agency.

Jerry Milner:

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And their discussions with us during that visit, the mothers used words to describe their experience that suggested happiness, health, optimism, support, empowerment and thriving. These are the different words that we want to hear from so many more of the families whose lives we touch. The home visiting services that we heard about there were wonderful, absolutely wonderful and primarily evidence-based programs that are helping families to grow stronger and to thrive. All of which we wholly support. We need those programs, but we need a heck of a lot more as well. We need programs that may never have the research behind them to meet evidence-based criteria, but that connect families like those women in South Carolina to fundamental supports and community-based conditions that enable them to care for their children safely and again to thrive.

Jerry Milner:

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We need programs that may never have the research base behind them, that normalize and recognize the strength and asking for help without fear of losing their children. We need programs that are designed by and operated by community members who know and understand what their families need and who had the best opportunities to respond to those needs in ways that reflect their family's culture and backgrounds. We believe strongly that community-based and community-run programs like some of the ones that you've had a chance to see and hear about this week that are culturally appropriate and consistent with their family's customs values and practices that draw upon those strengths. Whether we're in Indian country, in cities, suburban areas, rural locations all across the country. Those are one of our most tools to helping families avoid formal child welfare contact and they are key to confronting the disproportionality, the disparity that plague our child welfare system.

Jerry Milner:

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As a field we know too much about protective factors and protective capacities not to make robust investments in those kinds of programs and we need the flexibility and our federal funding that allows us to support those programs, and we're

going to get it. We also need the courage and the fortitude to do what's right for children and families as opposed to doing what's comfortable, what's familiar to law makers, administrators, providers of an old way of doing business. We've lacked that courage for far too long and we've carried on with the same old things in the same old ways even though they are producing the same poor outcomes. We need to see the humanity in the families we work with and help them to be connected, to feel supported, to see a path forward even when times are very hard.

Jerry Milner:

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When I meet with parents and babies like those in South Carolina, it reaffirms for me that we should care relatively less about whether what we offer to a family has one, two or three clinical randomized control trials behind it or has a written program manual to a copy in it and we should care much more about whether what we are offering to families helps them to stay together, to be together, to live together, to grow together and some live together. I care about that and I know that you do too. Not every family that comes to our attention needs clinical services to address pathology that they may not even have, we need to understand that. Most of our families, I would say the majority, I don't have hard data to prove it, need help combating the poverty that they're experiencing. They need help with their own youth and the limitations of their inexperience. They need help with their social isolation and their lack of accessible supports. And we need a system where they have a voice in expressing what they need and how those needs can best be met.

Jerry Milner:

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The relationships and the trust that we build with families, the ongoing support that we provide, our responses to what they tell us, this is what matters. We've got to get back to that. Couple of nights ago, after a long conference today here that started at seven o'clock in the morning and at least officially ended around seven o'clock at night, never really ends then. I was looking forward to meeting a dear friend at the conference for a beer at a bar down the street. As we sat there, I looked down and a young man, probably eight or nine years old, I'm guessing, I'm not a good, good judge of age. I hope you aren't either, looking at me. Stood there with his hand out and said, "Could I shake your hand?" It startled me, I wasn't expecting it in the bar. And I ask him to repeat himself and he said, "Can I shake your hand?" And so I shook his hand and as I shook his hand he said, "Thank you for helping children and families."

Jerry Milner:

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After I wiped a few involuntary tears away from my eyes and gave him a big hug, I said, "Who put you up to this?" And he

said, "My mama's friend." The point of telling you that story is not that we're out there and looking for thanks for what we do, but we are looking for families and children to feel acknowledged, to feel respected for what we do. For me, it's that affirmation that counts nothing else because it's their experiences that are my measures of success or failure. I want them to be able to earnestly use words of support, even gratitude and even if they're mama's friend put them up to it, I'll take it. If we can have that kind of an expression for the work that we do. One of the best ways that we can help ensure that their voice is heard is through ensuring that all parents and children in the child welfare system have access to high quality legal representation.

Jerry Milner:

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We recently made a policy change, you probably heard about it. That allows for title four administrative funds to be used to pay for parent and child legal representation, including candidates for foster care. This is a major step in ensuring that families get what they need. It's a major step in ensuring that their voices are clearly heard. Just as I've seen incredible examples through the years of the best that we have to offer in child welfare, I've also seen some of the worst. I've seen courts that have literally trampled on the rights of parents that have removed children first and ask questions later. Not with malicious intent, but with the misguided belief about how we can ensure safety and wellbeing of children and their parents. There are places in our country today where parents, youth, children in the foster care system do not have legal representation. Even though critical decisions that will affect their wellbeing and relationship for the rest of their lives are being made.

Jerry Milner:

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That should be entirely unacceptable to all of us and we should take all steps necessary to make sure that parents, children and youth, have the highest quality legal representation in those proceedings that we can provide them. I encourage you, I implore you, to take advantage of the opportunity that we've offered you and use this moment to find ways to help ensure that parents and children are well-represented legally in the child welfare system. As a broad child welfare system, it's time for all of us, whether we're feds, state, county, child welfare professionals, judges, attorneys, private sector providers, philanthropy, all of us to take a hard look at what we are doing and the results that we're achieving. We need to stop judging vulnerable families for their vulnerability. Stop measuring worthiness in what we offer, look hard at when and how long we offer it, and reconsider the level of suffering that must occur before we offer our help.

Jerry Milner:

[21:21](#)

This is another place where words matter. If we listened to the words that we choose to use to describe the families and children we serve, they can provide us with incredible insights into our sometimes subconscious views of those children and those families. So in addition to asking you to create the conditions whereby families can you legitimately use more positive words to describe their experiences, I'm going to ask you to embark on another challenge today. You don't have to agree to it, you don't have to say anything out loud, but I'm going to ask you to seriously think about how your words reflect the views you have of our children and our families. So this is the challenge after today, I'm asking you to stop using the following words in referring to the work that we do with children and families. I'm going to ask you to stop using the term foster child. At the very least it connotes something different and at the worst it can connotes something less than, neither are appropriate.

Jerry Milner:

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Children in foster care are just that, children, youth who happened to live in another home and at a time when belonging as you heard from Amelia Frank Meyer is so critical to their health and well-being. The term "foster child" suggests they don't belong, stop using that term. Stop using the term "birth parent"; it's suggests a role for a parent other than their legitimate role and it suggests that a child has other parents. It undermines the singular parent child relationship that is so critical to help the child development by placing that parent in another category in a limited role. I'm going to ask you to stop using the term "client". We're talking about children and families, let's call him that. The term client is dehumanizing and it allows us to think of the families that we work with in impersonal ways. Stop using the word "dysfunctional" to describe our families. It's a pejorative term and it's often inaccurate because so many of our families function just the way we would expect them to function and just the way we would function given the circumstances that they're in.

Jerry Milner:

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This one is going to be hard, but I'm going to ask you to stop using the word "foster parent". We need to think differently about what foster care is and what the role of foster families is in our system, and as long as we cling to outdated views and outdated words that connote those views and those roles of foster care and refer to them as such, we're going to be inhibited from moving to a place where foster families actually function as resource families for children and their parents. The importance of stopping use of these words is that different words can engender respect for our family's humanity. When we use different words, it can lead to a change of mindset, a

change of perspective that can become system wide. Different words can redefine our relationship with the people that we work for and can lead to meaningful changes in how we relate to them and ultimately different words can lead to systemic change.

Jerry Milner:

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This is something we can do today without new funding, without new policies, and it can begin what I think maybe our biggest challenge in changing child welfare in our country, which is changing our view of families and children. We owe it to leave here today and to lead boldly and to lead with a vision. We owe it to our families to listen to them, to try to understand their experiences and their needs. We owe it to families to bring justice to those who are underserved and overrepresented in our social services systems, including people of color and those people from different cultural backgrounds. We owe it to every child in foster care to ensure that they don't leave the foster care system disconnected, homeless, and facing the other horrible situations that we often leave them to confront on their own. We owe it to every child, youth, parent, and family to work together to create the conditions that will keep them strong and healthy and allow them to thrive in their own communities. Nothing else, nothing less will get us there. Thank you.