

Jon Wainwright: Hello and welcome back to CAP-impact's The Clinic. We're back today with Keri and Michelle. Just to remind our listeners real quick. What's the issue that you guys are working on?

Keri Firth: The issue that we are working on is foster care and specifically providing support to resource families, to improve support, preparation and skills of foster parents who provide care for the diverse trauma needs of the children placed in their care.

JW: Okay. So, last week we did introductions. We got to know you; we got to know really roughly the idea of what your bill is. Today is more about the research process. If you think of the whole show as being about how a bill becomes a law, today is really about how an idea becomes a bill.

So, let's start with this. How did you figure out that foster care was what you wanted to work on?

Michelle Evans: That probably started with me. Foster care is really a passion for me. I worked as a child welfare caseworker for several years when I lived in Utah and that motivated me to want to go to grad school.

And then a couple summers ago I did an internship with the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute in Washington, D.C. And I helped mentor a former foster youth in creating a policy proposal related to improving foster care.

So that has just been deep on my mind in wanting to continue that process of improving foster care here in California.

JW: Gotcha. So once you started with that, how did you narrow your focus down from the whole foster care system in California down to this pilot program that creates more training for foster parents?

KF: A lot of meetings and a lot of research. We started off with the broad idea and started looking into current legislation where there might be problems with foster care and started identifying interest groups to meet with to find out what sort of problems there might be that we could address with our policy proposal.

ME: We found that there are a lot of just amazing qualified people in California who are working on these issues that have been very generous in talking with us and offering suggestions and offering their insights and connecting us with other people. Every person we talk to gives us a new idea and a new resource.

So Keri and I stayed extremely busy continuing to follow up on their suggestions and suggestion after suggestion, the idea that we've come up with now is what continued to boil to the surface in each conversation that we had is kind of the most ambitious...

JW: Okay.

ME: ... goal that we might have, but also what might meet the most need and really be the most effective solution.

JW: Gotcha. Well, and I feel like having an ambitious bill is actually a good thing because if it comes to the point push is coming to shove and you have to do some wheeling and dealing and negotiation, and there has to be a little bit of give having something that's ambitious gives you that room to give a little if you absolutely have to.

KF: Yes it does.

JW: So you mentioned that you've done a lot of research, a lot of talking to people. What's kind of the balance of that? Are you finding that you're just spending a lot of time just hanging out in the California Archive and digging through laws, or spending a lot of time online, or are you doing a lot of talking, is it 50/50? What's the balance like?

KF: I think the majority is talking to people. Most of our time is spent in meetings with people associated with various interest groups and after our meetings we often come away with something that we need to do research on, that we need to learn more about some topic that was brought up during the meeting. So we do some online research, but most of our research has been done through in person meetings.

ME: And sifting through the laws, and the most current law, for example, AB 403 - that was passed two years ago for child welfare reform in California - that document's probably close to 400 pages long.

JW: That's no small task.

KF: She read it all.

ME: It is no small task but I really felt like it was important to really sift through that document. And it's proved really helpful as we met with people because as we meet with them we can come with an informed view. They can see that we've done our homework.

JW: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely can see how that is very helpful thing to be able to bring to the table.

So moving forward a little bit. You've done your research; you've pulled this idea together. As you know, and probably as a good number of our listeners know, that in California, you two, as an individual, as a pair of individuals, you can sponsor a bill, take it to a legislator, have them author it which is called getting an unbacked bill. Or maybe appropriately, maybe inappropriately in this case it's having an orphan bill.

And then you take that unbacked bill to legislators and you're pitching it them to author it. But before we get to that, backing up to getting to the unbacked bill, right. You still

have to get a legislator's office to say, "Yes, I'll do you this favor. I'll send it over to Leg Counsel so you can get this unbacked bill."

Did you have to put in a lot of research to figure out which office you go to, which legislator you go to to put that request in? Or was it more of just a ... I'm walking around the Building, I'm going to take the first legislator that says yes and we'll go with that?

ME: You know, it's interesting in our case. This is normally something you normally do need to put a lot of thought into to consider what legislator might be most sympathetic to this bill. Which one might've had experience or expertise that they might lend?

In our case, we knew that Assembly Member Maienschein ... First of all, he had worked on bills with our Clinic in the past.

JW: Okay.

ME: Second of all, every year he usually sponsors a bill related to foster care. So it's a field that he's become educated and sympathetic towards. And he also is known for working well with both sides of the party. He's Republican, but he's known for working well with Democrats and is well-respected in that way. And he's also in a leadership role.

So, all of those things considered, we early on approached his office and spoke with his legislative staff just to start early conversations with them, let them know what we were working on, just to see if they were interested.

JW: Gotcha.

ME: And, his legislative staff was immediately interested. They were actually excited about our ideas and started working with us, almost from Day One, when we were still in this development phase of what might this look like?

JW: Okay.

ME: So, for us, that was really exciting and really helpful to be able to identify him early on and for him to see the vision that we saw in working on this.

JW: So it was really almost more like you used this opportunity, to just get an idea turned into something unbacked, to really start the process of building a relationship with an office that could potentially author this bill down the road.

ME: Exactly, we really did use this to build a relationship with them from the beginning.

JW: And then, we've already kind of danced around it a little bit I feel like, we've talked about going into Maienschein's office as the place to go for getting the unbacked bill - history of working with the Clinic, history of working on foster care bills, history of being

able to work really well across the aisle. I think I've heard from other folks that as far as Republican members go, he's got one of the signature rates from the Governor because he's figured out how to dynamic pretty well.

What else went into your process in determining, "Who are we going to take this bill to and see if they'd be interested in authoring it?"

Or, was it just because you'd developed this really good relationship with Maienschein was it like, "This is our first stop, this is where we're going to put all our money on."

KF: Yes, we did develop a very good relationship with them. As Michelle said earlier, we started meeting them when we had this vague policy idea and as we continued to have meetings and do research and developed what eventually became our final policy proposal and our bill, they were very supportive. So we did want them to have first opportunity to author the bill.

JW: Okay. What was that process like, from taking the policy proposal, taking it to Maienschein's office, and then how does it become ... how does it go from policy proposal to unbacked bill? What's the process like?

KF: Well we had bill language for them to use for the unbacked bill. Last semester we also took the Lawmaking in California course and as part of that course we had to draft a bill. So we decided to draft our dream bill, our policy proposal.

JW: It's kind of a convenient overlap there.

ME: Right. We did kind of our own amendment to the bill AB 403 CCR that was just came out two years ago.

JW: Gotcha.

ME: So our dream bill is what we wrote.

KF: So we gave that to Maienschein's office, and they used that language that we had drafted to submit unbacked to the Legislative Counsel's office.

JW: And what kind of role does the Office of Legislative Counsel play in this process?

ME: The Legislative Counsel is counsel to all of the legislators, all 120 of them. And any bill, before it's passed into law, has to go through their office. Basically, they're the ones that write it.

So, we could've just submitted an idea and say this is what we want to do in bullet point format and ask them to write the bill. We had a good idea of what we hoped the bill language would be. Keri and I are new to this, so we kind of expected that they would mark it up and tell us how we couldn't do what we had proposed.

But we were really excited to get it back and they had made just some minor alterations and changed the code number that the bill would receive and gave their legal pass off on what we had proposed. And then they sent it back to Maienschein's office. I'm not sure if that answers your question?

JW: Yeah! That definitely gets to it. Now, we've talked about this process, and it's come back. Now, in your case, you have a bill number. You have an author. For the folks listening at home, since you've been able to get from idea to bill, who's authoring the bill? What's the bill number?

ME: Assembly Member Maienschein...

JW: Surprise. Surprise.

Michelle and Keri: AB 1784.

all chuckle

JW: Alright. Well, this has been a very insightful conversation. I think next week we'll start diving into more of the legislative process now that we've gone from idea to actual bill. Thank you so much for sitting down with us and we'll all talk again next week.

ME: Fantastic. Thank you.