

Jon Wainwright: Hello, and welcome to the first episode of CAP impact's new show, The Clinic, where we will be exploring the process of how a bill becomes a law in California through the first-hand experiences of students in the McGeorge Legislative and Public Policy Clinic.

On our inaugural season of The Clinic, we'll be working through the legislative process with Keri Firth and Michelle Evans. Each episode will progress California's legislative process with Keri and Michelle. On our first episode today, we're just going to get to know our two students and learn a little bit about the issue they're working on. Thank you so much to both of you for letting us join you on this experience.

Michelle Evans: Thanks for having us.

Keri Firth: Yes, thank you for having us. This is a fun experience.

JW: So, before we dive into the core of your bill, let's first give our listeners a chance to know you both a little bit better. For starters, what drew you into wanting to work on public policy?

ME: I first started, this is Michelle, and I just started because my background is in social work. I have a Master's degree in social work. I started a private mental health practice and I was no longer working with children, specifically. I didn't have a professional goal related to working with children.

So, I started thinking about what I could do professionally and nothing was quite hitting the spot, so when I thought about going to law school and combining a law degree with my social work background and working with children, that just really resonated.

I thought I could combine that to be able to advocate for laws that affect children and here I am.

JW: Very cool.

KF: For me it started about ten years ago. I began to be more interested in political issues and wanting to delve deeper into the issues so I decided to go back to school and earn my Bachelor's and Master's in Public Policy, and then that led me to law school.

JW: So then it seems then, that, this clinic, the Legislative and Public Policy Clinic, is kind of that ideal fit for both of you.

ME: It's been amazing.

JW: For those who aren't familiar with this particular course at McGeorge, can you just give them a really quick explainer about what it is?

KF: The clinic is a small group of students, usually between 10-12 students. We work in pairs to identify a policy problem and come up with a solution to fix that problem. Usually it's a bill, but sometimes it can be an ordinance or regulation. If it's a bill, then you work to identify an author for that bill.

We meet once a week with Rex Frazier, our professor, and everyone in the group provides feedback to each other. And Rex also provides feedback and guides us through the process.

JW: And I have to imagine being able to get that feedback from Rex, who's one of the most respected lobbyists in town, is amazing insights to be able to get.

KF: Yes. It's very valuable.

ME: Yeah. That's been an amazing experience.

JW: Now that we've kind of gotten the background, the intros out of the way here, and we've gotten a chance to get to know you, let's start diving into the bill a little bit. And before we get too deep, let's just go at ... What's the main issue that you're working on here? What's the top line issue here?

ME: This bill is related to foster care. Keri and I chose this because as we discussed our public policy we were concerned about the trauma children experience when they come into foster care. And then once they get in to foster care, at least half, experience more than one placement - sometimes two, three, five, I've heard of children experiencing 24 placements - during their time in foster care, which creates more trauma.

We want them to experience more stability which we believe will increase the outcomes for these children and experience permanency, either in an adoptive home or in reunification with their biological families.

JW: Suddenly the bill is making a little more sense with your background in social work.

ME: Yes, yep. I have some experience with foster care.

JW: So I would imagine that's part of the inspiration for why you chose this particular issue to work on. Or at least yours, Michelle.

ME: You're right. This is exactly why I came to law school. And I'm having the opportunity in the Clinic right now to do it.

JW: So, Keri, what was your part in figuring out this issue and wanting to work on this?

KF: Well Michelle and I, once we decided that we would be working together on a bill, my primary interest in joining the Clinic was just to be part of the public policy process - to see a bill come to pass.

I've studied a number of different public policy issues in my undergraduate and graduate career. I have a lot of different interests, and Michelle is very passionate about foster care and we decided to do that. It has been a very rewarding experience.

JW: Great. So now, one last question. Which particular aspect and maybe we've kind of touched on this a little bit, which part of the foster care system specifically are you working on with this bill?

KF: With this bill we are working, the bill will be a pilot program that will direct the Department of Social Services to create a pilot program that will increase placement stability. Counties can elect to participate in the program. It's not going to be a state mandated program.

ME: Right. and we'll do that by offering additional supports to foster parents. The idea is that these parents can receive post-placement coaching once a child is placed with them in their home where they can receive one-on-one support on how to help these children once they're in their home.

Prior to placement, these families receive anywhere from 12-30 hours of classroom training.

JW: Okay.

ME: It's an entirely different story when they have a child in their home that was just removed from their family last night. We don't know what trauma they've experienced, but now they're in this new home. And it's very different when you go from classroom to, "Wow, I have this child right in front of me and we're having some issues and I need help right now."

JW: I can imagine nothing really prepares you for that first moment when the kid comes to your doorstep and it becomes very real very fast.

ME: Right. We want to provide coaches for these families to help them along this process so that rather than feeling overwhelmed and feeling like we just got in over our heads here and asking for the child to be removed we have someone who can help them through the process to maintain that placement for the child.

JW: Very cool. It sounds like we've got a very interesting bill here, and we're going to leave it with just this kind of taster to start with. Next week we'll start diving into the research process - how you figured out how this was the part of the foster care system you wanted to help with this bill. We'll go through the research process there and how this evolves from policy idea to piece of legislation. So, for now, thanks so much for joining us and look forward to checking back in next week.

KF: Yes, thank you.

ME: Thanks, Jon.