

Jon Wainwright: Hello, and welcome back to episode 4 of CAP·impact's The Clinic. Welcome back Keri and Michelle, how's everything been going?

Michelle Evans: Great.

Keri Firth: Yeah we've been having a great time with this process; it's been very busy but fun.

JW: Yeah, and we're in kind of the new part of the process where you're getting into committee. I cannot remember if we touched on this last time but which policy committee did your bill get referred to.

KF: It was the Assembly Committee on Human Services.

JW: Okay, and then so who's been your primary like point of contact with the committee there. Has it been the main consultant or one of the consultants? Who's been the main person you've been working with?

KF: The Deputy Consultant, Kelsey Castillo.

ME: Castillo or Castillo. One of those. But she's been our main person. We actually had a chance to meet with her before our bill was even officially assigned. We had started laying some groundwork and so she already knew us and-

KF: Yeah back when it was just a policy proposal last semester, we had went to that Assembly committee because we knew our bill would likely be assigned there and met with both Kelsey and the Deputy Consultant Daphne.

JW: Okay. And how were those kind of initial conversations with her?

KF: They were really, really good. Both she and Daphne like the idea of our policy proposal and were pretty supportive of it and were hopeful we would turn it into a bill.

ME: Right and they had good ideas and offered us feedback of things to consider or people to talk to just to help us improve which has been the nicest thing about this. And one of the most surprising things about this process is just so helpful people have been and eager to offer suggestions and feedback and assistance and encouragement. It's yeah.

KF: Yeah telling them that we are participants in the Legislative and Public Policy Clinic, I think they give us more of their time and feedback than what a typical bill sponsor or lobbyist get when they go into those offices. They really want to help us out because they know we are law students. Many of them have heard of the clinic and want to help us out.

JW: Okay so, those were obviously the initial conversations when you still just have kind of the raw policy proposal. How was that- Did that shift at all once you came back with an actual bill to start working on with them?

ME: It got a little bit more tricky when it came down to where the rubber meets the pavement, and this is really, really, this is more than just an idea and it feels good to in practice, what does each word mean? That became a little bit more tricky.

KF: They had a lot more pointed questions of- where did various interest groups stand? Where did the Department of Social Service stand? They had funding questions about different components of the bill, then they starting asking about where we would potentially be willing to make amendments and cut things from the bill.

JW: Gotcha. Were there any amendments, or kind of, changes that they had- maybe not forced, but kind of strongly suggested you make with the bill?

KF: In our first meeting, there was really only one they wanted us to cut the hotline. We actually met with Kelsey several times from the time the bill was introduced until she did her final analysis so, at first it was just one, thing to be cut but then I think it was our second or third meeting, she made it clear that she was going to reorganize the bill.

JW: Sounds like a PC way of saying, hack to pieces.

KF: Yes. The intent of the bill remained the same.

JW: Okay.

KF: But it really was hacked to pieces and- but unfortunately that was part of the, not so fun part of this political process, is accepting that as unpleasant as that is, it did still maintain the original intent of our bill and we had to accept the amendments in order to ensure the bill would go through the policy committee.

JW: Gotcha.

ME: So then main point of the bill was still there, just some of the intent language that we had- you know we were a little, we worked hard on that language so to have someone say 'I don't like the way that's written, I like it better the way I wrote it' it was just really hard to swallow, but once we saw past that and saw that it was still basically doing what we wanted it to do, we were okay with that.

JW: Okay.

KF: We may have opportunity in the future to amend it again ourselves, our professor Frazier pointed out last night, pointed out that we are only on step 2 out of 8, in this process and there's possibilities that in the Assembly or in the Senate it could be amended further and possibly get some of that language back in.

ME: Right, and Kelsey in working with us even mentioned that to us, she recognized that some of the intent language had been removed and suggested that in the future, we could put some of that language back in.

JW: Okay, so what were the amendments? It sounds like the language of the intent got pulled out, were there any other changes in terms of like, how things get implemented? Or what were the amendments that, or, some of them maybe just a quick recap I guess.

ME: The main idea is that we folded into one section, there's two sections of the bill, and one section folds in that resources families, kinship families, foster families, that word kind of covers the gamut. That they'll be informed of what resources are available to them to be supportive of them and that would be- include but not limited to respite services, 24 hour hotlines, community services such as mental health, all of those kinds of things that would be available to them.

We want them to be informed and know in writing and perhaps on county websites what those things are and how to access them upon placement of a child. And that isn't always happening, hands down like, it's, it kind of varies place to place and so that got folded into one section rather than us creating our own 24 hour hotlines, CWDA in conjunction a couple of other organizations are doing that.

JW: And who's CWDA?

ME: The County Welfare Directors Association. We actually found out early on from them, that they were working on a bill specifically related to a 24 hour hotline, and so that doesn't necessarily have to be included in our bill even though we want to make sure that families have 24 hour access to someone, whoever is participating in the pilot.

So basically, that's one section and then the first section is the pilot where families for counties who opt-in and participating families who will be assigned a designated coach.

JW: Okay, so that's all pretty much, that was the process you had with the main committee consultants. How did things go with the minority consultants, the Republican Caucus? Those members of the committee?

ME: Oh that was great.

KF: Yeah that was very helpful. So that consultant we've been working with is Alex Kahn, who's an alum of McGeorge and of the Clinic.

JW: Oh very cool.

KF: Yeah so he-

ME: That was lucky.

JW: Makes things a little easier. Starts the conversation nicely.

KF: Yeah, so he's very supportive of what we're doing and he of course still writes his analysis as he needs to, but he gives us advice along the way and we have been able to meet with him and talk with him on the phone or by email several times just for general advice on working with the Assembly on this bill.

ME: And I have to say, you know, one day I stopped by his office, I thought I'd be there for just a few minutes and he actually spent quite a bit of time with me and he asked really hard questions. Like he had me up before I went to sleep at night, I was online researching just to be sure that I was completely, were, I just wanted to be 100% sure where I thought I was and where I wanted to be and so just because he knew us and he was a McGeorge alum

JW: He didn't go easy on you.

KF: No.

ME: He didn't necessarily on, like he asked-

JW: Which is actually, probably, a really good thing.

ME: Oh it was great and by the end of that, I felt like he was like very much all-in too. Like we answered his questions and I think he could reasonably get behind what we were doing and authentically be supportive of what was happening.

KF: He's been very helpful as I mentioned but that help is sometimes in the form of asking tough questions, giving us reality checks, but it's just nice to know that we're getting that helpful information from someone who's been through this process and has our best interest in mind.

ME: Yeah that part is really nice.

KF: Yeah.

JW: Okay, that's talking with the minority consultant. We talked about the majority, the committee staff there. How did, kind of, meetings with the staff of the committee members go?

ME: So we did make appointments with all of the- the staffers for each of the committee members, there are 7 members from the Assembly that sat on the Human Services Committee and that actually, that was a really good experience. What were your thoughts Keri?

KF: Yeah that was very helpful. Each of the staffers that we met with, we met with one person from each office, each of the seven offices, and they were all prepared with questions or concerns or comments from their members regarding our bill. Most of them at the time we were done with the meeting were very confident in our bill. I think only two of them that said they would come out in support but we didn't get the sense that any were going to oppose us so that really helped planning going into the hearing.

JW: It's a nice little confidence booster to not have anyone say 'Well you're not getting our vote on this one.'

KF: It's still nerve-wracking because you never know how it's going to go, but the meetings went really well, we felt like we thoroughly answered all of their questions.

ME: Yeah that was the part of the process, being new to the political scene that I didn't know about. You know, I was all ready to research the policy and come up with some good ideas and talk to people about the ideas. The meeting with the staffers, they really were supportive and they asked, again, good questions. They were open, they had already spoken with their members about the bill and gotten a little bit of feedback from

them and so, yeah, it seemed like a very important part of the process to have a lot of that work done ahead of the committee. So once we got into committee, we didn't anticipate too many surprises at that point.

KF: Yeah.

JW: Okay, what other kind of prep work went into leading up to the, obviously you've talked to committee staff, minority staff, staff of the members, what, what part of the picture are we missing here? Or is that kind of the all-encompassing picture of the prep work for the hearing?

KF: Finding an expert witness to testify, that was the other piece that we had worked on. Michelle and I spent so many months researching this, we both could have testified. We are allowed to have two people testify but really wanted to find an expert in child welfare, somewhere within that realm to testify.

ME: Right so we worked on that, how we wanted the day of the hearing to go, how do we want this day to go? If we could map it out ideally? So that was one piece that we were very thoughtful about, and also just trying to garner more support and trying to get letters of support and community organizations to say 'hey we like this bill' and to officially send a letter to the committee.

JW: Yeah it's that coalition building process.

ME: The coalition building, so we really spent a lot of time on the coalition building. And also there are one or two that had concerns about some language in the bill that we really, like, the SEIU, they had a concern about we put in some language that we thought they wanted and then they backtracked and said 'no no no, you cannot put that in there, my boss will make me come out in opposition and I don't want to do that' and so

JW: And they're not a group you want opposing your bill.

ME: No! And they've actually been so wonderful- I mean very wonderful to work with. And we've have that very open and honest relationship so those were the two other things behind the scenes just making sure that we weren't stepping on any toes with the bill going into committee and we wouldn't have any surprise 'wait, we're not comfortable with this' in the committee. And then just also the technicality of what, how will we testify and who will testify.

JW: Okay so it sounds like you did a ton of legwork leading up, which I think it probably par for the course. What kind of, were there any other supports or helps or opportunities to prepare that you got from the clinic itself.

ME: So our Monday night class for the clinic was really excited for us, very engaged and they just offered that class before we actually went to committee to help us prepare and so we talked through the whole process, the things we were working on and then we actually practiced our comments. And I was testifying, we'd invited Jen Rexroad to testify as well and had sent her some potential talking points and so I practiced in front of the class what I had been working on which was kind of nerve wracking. Like I think I spent more time on that preparing some of those comments than I did in our oral arguments. Because it just was, you know, it's just real and I feel so strongly about this bill, I wanted it to go well. And then Keri was able to practice the point that we prepared for Jen Rexroad.

KF: Yeah I read her two minutes of testimony that we had written so that we were both able to get feedback on the testimony that we had written for the hearing.

ME: And just in case Keri needed to fill in too.

KF: Right it was a little bit prepared in case I had to fill in.

JW: Yeah well and it's also good just to get that practice in of being able to like, being able to read those points in front of other people rather than just, you know, at your desk or in front of a mirror. It's very different to have someone other than your own eyeballs staring back at you.

ME: Right. And if it instead of being in your own head to see 'okay did that even make sense just now or did it do what you were hoping it would do'

JW: Yeah and that's the value of having other people, too, right. Because you can understand it in your head because you're so deep in the weeds no matter how you phrase it, it's going to make sense.

ME: Right so having the feedback from the clinic was, was really helpful if nothing else to build confidence because honestly it was a little bit nerve wracking. I was so nervous about testifying and wanted it to go well. To do everything within our power to have it go well so, it was really nice to have the support of the clinic, knowing that they would give honest feedback and that they were also invested in our success. It was really helpful to have that.

JW: That's great, well; I mean that's great to know that that kind of support is there. I think we'll leave it at that for now. I think we've covered all of the prep work; we dove into it, so for the time being, thanks for taking the time to talk again and we'll touch base again after the committee hearing and see what all shakes out.

KF: Sounds good.

ME: Great. Thanks!