

Samantha Michael, Director of Business Services 00:05

Rutgers School of Social Work

Hi and welcome to the fourth episode of the fourth season of toward a more just future, a podcast from Rutgers School of Social Work. My name is Samantha Michael, and I'm the Director of Business Services here at the school this season. I'm speaking with directors and members of institutes and centers at the school about their work, their connections to the field of social work, engagement with communities throughout all of New Jersey and beyond, and how their areas of focus prove critical to the future. Today, we'll be speaking with Theresa McCutcheon, director of the Institute for families or IFF at the School of Social Work, as Managing Director of the Institute.

Theresa leads a team of more than 100 professionals delivering a \$20 million portfolio of training, technical assistance and applied research projects, advancing the human service and child welfare workforce. Prior to joining Rutgers, she led an array of community based initiatives through the educational and social service sector. She began her career conducting assessments with new parents to identify how caregiver support benefits newborns. In addition, she grew New Jersey's first home visitation pilots into a statewide network. She was a national trainer for Prevent Child Abuse America, as well as several evidence based parenting models. As a certified school social worker, she managed school based clinical programming for youth and as an avid community organizer, she held leadership positions directing University and county based volunteer programs.

McCutchen has served as a consultant for nonprofit executives and board members and volunteers for local nonprofit boards. She's been a lecturer at the School of Social Work, and is a Rutgers Leadership Academy fellow. Her most challenging and rewarding role, however, has been raising two spirited young men. The Institute for families advances the professional practice and knowledge base of individuals and organizations, creating brighter futures for children, youth and their caregivers. IFF provides training, technical assistance and Applied Research and Evaluation Services, they move this important body of work forward through collaboration with public agencies, community based organizations, national thought leaders, expert professionals and educators and persons with lived experiences. These partnerships create practices, services and systems that give children the opportunity to flourish as a proud extension of the School of Social Work's path toward a more just future.

IFF embodies the school's commitment to change the trajectory of children and families who experience disparate access to health care, education, income, equity and social opportunity. IFF is a multi disciplinary community of highly skilled practitioners. The team includes 80 full time and 20 part time professionals and over 100 consulting subject matter experts, all of whom regularly collaborate to develop and deliver initiatives. Over the past five years, more than 90 doctoral graduate and undergraduate students have been trained at the Institute as employees and field interns. The IFF team is called upon to share practices with jurisdictions across the country and regularly presents at national conferences. Theresa, thank you so much for joining us today. We're excited to have you here for our fourth episode of the fourth season of this podcast,

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 04:02

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I'm glad to be here. Samantha, look forward to the conversation.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 04:06

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To kick us off, could you give us an overview of the Institute for families or IFF and the work that you do?

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 04:13

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Absolutely so our commitment is about advancing the knowledge and practices of the individuals and systems who are working to create brighter futures for children and their caregivers. And in that work, our focus really mirrors the people in organizations who come into their lives, particularly if they can benefit from support or education in any way, as families or as children. So we focus on early childhood, child welfare and family well being, human services and research and evaluation, and that work includes both long term and short term programming in these areas. Our largest effort at IFF is about educating the state's child welfare, early childhood and child support workforces, as well as those community based organizations they engage in serving families and in that work. You touch about 50,000 professionals each year.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 05:03

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So, it sounds like there's a lot of moving pieces that go into supporting the Institute and all of the individuals that are doing this amazing work. Could you tell us about the path that led you to your role and where you are now as managing director?

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 05:19

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So I was an undergraduate student. It was the late 80s, and I was doing work with a community organization that supported persons who were impacted by AIDS. This was the late 80s, and there was an incredible amount of stigma and inequity impacting those persons. They were largely gay men, and we were at a very different place in honoring who they were as individuals and how they were affected by AIDS. And I remember joining the organization as a volunteer, thinking I can help them. I want to do something. And as I met them and became part of what they were experiencing, I quickly realized that I was part of the problem that I represented a community and a system that was creating barriers for them, that was isolating them, and my work with them helped me realize that I wanted to be part of that change. So it really started, for me, a trajectory in bringing together resources and understanding both people and their experiences differently I was I then was working at the University of Buffalo in a role that connected students and university resources with the larger Buffalo community. And being part of those changes was really profound for me as a human being and as a professional, because I

saw that I could start brokering resources for those individuals and for those organizations, for those larger communities, to create mutual benefit. And that was macro social work for me. And Samantha, you shared earlier, you know, in your introduction, a little bit about my history, my professional history, but when I left social work. And as I graduated, some of my first work was in a career, doing assessments with parents of newborns, and my work was clinically helping them look at, let's say, you know, an assessment to understand what their support was before they left those hospitals or prenatal clinics and were about to raise these children and and to connect them with home visitors or whatever community resources would help empower them as families. Really, it was about having conversations with them to understand what was happening in their life and how prepared did they feel to now raise this tiny human being, you know, on their own, outside of you know, outside in the world. So it was again about connecting resources. And I had a concurrent concurrently, I was working to develop a network of home visitation programs that provided similar support to new parents. So the work was creating home visitation programs that 20 years later, 30 years later, served as the foundation of what our New Jersey's home, home visiting programs today. And I mentioned those experiences because that programming was really a focus on child abuse prevention, and child abuse prevention is really a responsibility that we all have as professionals, as citizens, I'd say, as human beings, to ensure that every caregiver, regardless of where they live, what color their skin is, how they define their family structure, every parent and caregiver can access the support that they need to care for their child and to raise their family and meeting those needs rather than being threatened to have your child removed or your family disrupted because those things are impacting you, is about that responsibility and that prevention focus that you know is core to my work and a lot of the work we here do at IFF, so I'm really proud that the work we're doing represents that commitment here at the Institute and their work we're working with state partners and with stakeholders who have that same commitment I joined IFF about 10 years ago after a number of leadership positions and work in community based organizations across the state, largely in family support programs and child abuse prevention. And I came to IFF working on the New Jersey Child Welfare Training Partnership was, which was an educational commitment and is remains today, our educational commitment for the child protection and permanency workforce here in the state, after being asked to serve as acting director of IFF a little more than five years ago, I accepted the permanent, permanent role as director a year ago.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 09:47
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Can you tell us about some of the projects that you're working on and a little bit about their impact across the state?

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 09:57

Absolutely, there's so many that we're proud of. We've been partnering with the New Jersey Department of Children and Families to re envision how we prepare and educate new family and child serving professionals experience for new workers. It includes asynchronous as well as in person and field learning, and we're really excited to be piloting the first sessions in the coming months. Another area of our work is grow New Jersey training services. So on any given

day, there are several 100,000 infants and toddlers in child care in New Jersey, and this is happening at a time when 90% of all brain development is occurring in their little minds. So these babies are developing neurological pathways and social emotional connections that are the foundation for their future. It's also preparing them to be learners if they enter school. So it's so important that the professionals in early care and early learning programs, whether they're in child care centers, whether they're in family care homes or they're in preschools, that these professionals and they are professionals. They are not part time babysitters. They are professionals that they are prepared and that they're supported, and our work does that. So each year we offer about 40 different courses that train 25,000 early childhood professionals for their work with very young children. This is a really critical commitment in supporting the quality of New Jersey system of early care and honoring the professionals who support these children through the New Jersey child support Institute, we're working with the Division of Family developments, Office of Child Support, the family division of the courts and county social service organizations, to ensure that children in homes where parents may not be living together are receiving support, not just in the form of money, but also health care, emotional support. So our work includes trained professionals who support parents who are engaged in the child support system, by helping the professionals understand not only the highly technical and regulated practices around child support cases, but that they also understand what the family experiences in going through that, and we do that through direct training to groups of professionals. Last year, we delivered more than 450 courses for more than 5000 professionals, but we also have some targeted educational events. We partnered with some collaborators for for example, in an annual statewide conference that reached 800 professionals, and we were part of delivering 14 workshops at that conference itself. I'll say also that at any given time, our learning and development team, who are a talented group of instructional designers, are applying innovation in technologies and adult learning so that whatever our learning products are, they're teaching professionals how to apply what research and practice informs us as best practice into their everyday interactions with families. Members of our research team presented at the national staff development and training conference this year to talk about how they use technology in supporting the creation of 21 different county profiles. And these county profiles were part of needs assessments, 21 different ones that presented indicators of Child and Family Well Being to inform human service professionals in those counties as their planning program and planning services locally across the state. We also partnered with the Office of New Americans at the New Jersey Department of Human Services. We did a needs assessment that taught us about the needs and barriers for newly integrated and first generation families and how they access support in the state to keep those families healthy and connected. And we're forecasting that five of our IFF fellows, these are our cohort of about 20 students we mentor here at Rutgers as they come to campus with after lived experiences in foster care or in home with homelessness. Five of those fellows are going to be graduating this year nationally. About half of these youth finished high school, less than 5% with life experiences in foster care, graduate college, and about 70% of our fellows here at Rutgers earn their degree. We're really champions for those five students, as well as the IFF fellows in general.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 14:15

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That's very exciting. I have a cheering section for them. So thank you for sharing a little bit about all of the projects that you're working on. You gave us a preview of some of the collaborations and even the partnerships that you have, and it sounds like so much of your work is tied to those partnerships and engagement with communities. Can you talk about if's network of collaborators and what that looks like, and then maybe some highlights

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 14:42

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absolutely that collaboration really drives our work. It defines it. It drives it. It helps us refine it. I'd say the most impactful and the proudest part of our work is that partnership. So we're working really closely in the state of New Jersey with state leaders at the New Jersey to. Department of Children and Families, New Jersey, Department of Human Services, as well as an array of the community providers, those organizations who are delivering different types of programs and services to support families. And in that work, we're often at the table listening to what their vision, what their priorities, what their what needs they're seeing, so that we can understand how to translate that into education, into training that's going to impact the practices of those professionals. I think the the the most proudest conversations that happen are when those partners also ask us, Well, what are you hearing in your educational sessions? What are you hearing from the professionals who reach families and children? What are they saying, and what are they telling you about what's really happening in the field, in their everyday interactions with families and being part of that conversation, so that then, in terms the programming and the policies that our state agencies and our state leader leaders are considering is really a highlight for us, because we're able to then represent what those needs, not just of the families and children are, but of those people's those people who are serving them and supporting them every day. So

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 16:24

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we're going to switch gears a little bit and talk about kind of the operational aspect of running the institute when it comes to funding, what goes into making sure an institute this size and like IFF works, how do you manage, wanting to produce good, research based training programs and effective outcomes, but also needing to keep the organization running.

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 16:49

Rutgers School of Social Work

It's a it's a delicate balance, I'd say, of business and of social work. The most important part of our work, if we're going to realize our mission, if we are going to be effective, is to ensure that whatever we're doing is of high quality and that there's an accountability to it, right? That's important, not just for the work that we do and the commitment we have to our mission, to our employee credo, to our contract deliverables, but it also keeps us relevant and it keeps us competitive, and that's a conversation I often have with my teams. You know, what does this mean for us in terms of the work that we're doing and not just our quality, but how we're going

to remain important and relevant in the array of services out there for families? So in everything that we do, there's a commitment to accountability and there's a commitment to understanding that we represent the School of Social Work. We're really proud, you know, we are one of the top schools in the country. We represent Rutgers University, you know, as a big 10. So how is that education and how is our work informed by research and informed by evidence that tells us it's the best practice. So there's a strong level of accountability in really looking at did we do our discovery to look at what we're training represents that best practice. So the work and the content itself and the education and training we provide is always research based, and we're always looking at, what are national centers? What are national experts telling us about what creates change? What are our own state partners seeing in their outcomes and in their their practices? When we implement that programming, whether it's a training or it's a type of service or technical assistance. We're also sure that there's an a commitment to accountability and quality assurance and everything that we do. So aside from strong supervision and management right, which is part of every practice and an important part of social work, macro management, we also have tools that look at, how do we measure what we're doing our levels of service. So there are monthly reports on what we're producing and what we're delivering. We do six month, very comprehensive six month training evaluation reports that have everything from pre and post tests to training satisfaction surveys that give us qualitative information. And these are all feedback loops, then that we look at in terms of understanding how our instructors are managing the classroom conversation, how are what our learners in that classroom are telling us about, how they're going to apply what they're hearing in a training to their practice and they they give us measures then and information that we take back to our stakeholders. These are all really complex, personal and life changing experiences, so that. Of quality assurance, that level of reflection is something that we take seriously for our teams and how they manage them, as well as how we're reporting and producing these deliverables for our contract commitments and for our stakeholders. So all of those areas we consider quality assurance, we consider best practice, and they're all rooted in the commitment to research and the commitment to professionalism that we stand for as an institute and we know is embodied in work here at the school and the university.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 20:33

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Thank you. What I what I also hear in your answer, is just the the underlying passion for the work and wanting to be supportive and engaged with the partners that you're working with too, not just from you Tess, but from your team as well. Team, absolutely.

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 20:48

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Yeah. And we joke, you know, often that, like, it takes much more time and effort to have that commitment, but it's an investment that produces those results, given we're talking about human beings.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 21:03

Rutgers School of Social Work

Thank you. As a director, you're responsible for all the work, all the moving pieces that go into making the institute run. Can you talk a little bit about what some of your major areas of responsibility are?

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 21:16

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So it's a combination for me, of really strong management, planning and negotiation. So on any given year, our portfolio of contracts is about \$25 million and many of them represent long term commitments that require we're always negotiating with our stakeholders to understand, what do they want us to focus on this year? What's important for families or communities that needs to be different than it was this year versus two years ago. And how does that change the programming and services in our contracts? So that means a lot of listening and sharing and learning along the way, which is great social work and important relationship building, but it also means a lot of administrative work, right? So there comes with we are a large system, a large bureaucracy here at Rutgers, and many, if not most, of our stakeholders are also, you know, as state agencies, large bureaucracies, so there's a fair amount of administrative effort that goes into ensuring those contracts are in place. They're defined, and they represent a scope of work and agreement that we can stand behind that's really clear up front. It's strong project management and a lot of humility in being able to be flexible as those areas change, with a team of 80 people all representing different talents, different perspectives, different disciplines and different needs. There's also a lot of work that goes into creating a culture that embodies professionalism, right, that ensures we're following, you know, equitable and fair HR practices, but also creating room where they feel like they're part of a team, and they feel motivated and satisfied in their that work as well. So internally, that means meeting and conducting a lot of one on ones. You know, we're listening to the work. We're listening to experiences that are happening with trainers, that are happening with our learning and development team, that are happening, you know, in applied research projects. So we can then inform the work that we're doing.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 23:38

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So in conversations about social work, we have a strong commitment to connecting research and practice. How do you see the Institute for families contributing to this mission?

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 23:48

Rutgers School of Social Work

I would say that in every way that we operate, we are considering the values of Social Work and the commitment of a university in our work. And I feel really proud that as an institute, we embody those, those, you know, say pillars of that work. So there's strong community engagement, you know, as I talked about the different partners across the state, and we've done work with national jurisdictions as well, that's strong commitment, and that's representing not just the university, but the school, and, you know, body of work and expertise and resources

that exist here, and how we extend them out into other communities, the scholarly aspect of being part of the school and part of the university is also apparent when we are starting any project, you know, we're looking at, what are the best practices out there, what is research telling us, us, what have other experts already done, and how does that apply? What is that going to mean in terms of how we implement here for. One of our own communities here in New Jersey, and that unique professional and his or her or their unique role. And then I think also in terms of, you know, training and preparing students, we're so proud to have not just practicum students and part time workers in fields from everything from graphic design to data science, certainly to social work involved as research assistants. And we're really excited that we often hire them, you know, into full time roles. I think right now, we probably have five or six individuals who graduated from the MSW program who are on our team. So in all of those areas, you know, in that scholarly work, in applying research to practice, in practicing applied research in various projects, in preparing students, you know, for their careers, and training them, and in strongly in community engagement. You know, we see that as contributions, not just to our mission, but as an extension of the School of Social Work we're really proud of.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 26:09

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So recognizing that so many of your projects are in partnership with the state of New Jersey and certain agencies, and that you're spread out across New Jersey, could you talk to us about your aspirational goals for New Jersey in this area, and then if you have any similar goals for Rutgers as an institution? Yeah.

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 26:30

Rutgers School of Social Work

So we're keenly aware of the challenges that we've come out of after the pandemic and are headed into in terms of recruitment and retention of the human service or child welfare workforce. So when I think about the years ahead, I'm really interested in how we as an institute can be engaged in helping with those issues. And we've got a little work to do in terms of defining what that looks like. But you know, a lot of our helping professionals are really burnt out after the last few years, many of us were in Human Services and child welfare in early childhood, they were essential personnel, and are still getting back to their normal after the pandemic. We live in a society and in a culture where everyone is sort of re examined what their commitment is, and we are a workforce that has four generations now practicing and, you know, sharing space, so really looking at what does the workforce need in Human Services and child welfare to continue to recruit highly qualified and committed professionals, and to keep them in those roles so that their institutional knowledge, their training that gets preserved and honored. So I'd like for us as an institute to continue having a role in that. We want to continue advancing the quality of early care and learning. So I'm excited to continue working with the state, with our networks of child care resource and referral agencies, and with those center and family home based programs as well as preschools, and ensuring that that quality exists and that those professionals who are caring for infants and young children have what they need to provide that. And then we're excited to continue working to really follow the state's lead here in transforming what child welfare looks like, so building family support, so that families don't

have to be engaged in a place where they're they're looking at safety or risk factors for and have instead the resources they need to care for their children and care for their family, and in all of those areas, we want to continue advancing our DEI practices. So as one concrete example, I'm really proud of our one of our teams internally is really doing a body of work that ensures when we create any kind of training, or we create any kind of education, we're moving through a very purposeful, a very evidence based and a very practical set of steps to look at how we are representing the families, the identities, The stories that are told in a classroom to ensure that, again, they're equitable, they honor the diversity of learners and identities that we come in contact with and partner with, and that they're assessable and inclusive of everyone.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 29:36

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And we say that that's maybe an aspirational goal you might have for Rutgers and some other work that exists the university,

Theresa McCutcheon, Director of the Institute for Families 29:43

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Absolutely, you know, I hope we're learning from each other. You know, in that way, we certainly embrace and apply Dr love's framework, liberatory consciousness framework, to all of our work and that in itself. You know, while we're doing some of that now, that needs to continue being aspirational, and we need to continue learning from each other in that aspect. So absolutely, that's something we share in common with the school and with Rutgers University overall.

Samantha Michaele, Director of Business 30:16

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Thank you, Tess, we appreciate you sharing your time and journey with us today!