**Humanizing Black lives – an interview with Kelis Houston on the pilot of the African American Family Preservation Act (AAFPA)**

**April 2022**

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***Alia:*** Can you tell us the history of your organization and what lead you to the work you are doing today?

***Kelis****:* My work in child welfare advocacy began after serving for five years at St. Joseph’s Home for Children in Minneapolis. At that time, St. Joseph’s was the central intake shelter for Hennepin County and often the first stop for children once removed from their families. It was there that I witnessed first-hand the trauma children experience when separated.

I served on the emergency shelter unit and was shocked to discover that at any given time, 100% of the kids placed with us would be African American. These children sometimes returned to us 3-4 times per year before aging out of the system without permanency. Witnessing this pattern and trend consistently lead me to want to have a voice in the court room, so I volunteered as guardian ad litem (GAL) for a year before taking a full-time position as a cultural specialist GAL for another three years.

As GAL, I witnessed the court and child protection system work together to perpetuate disparities. This discovery brought me to community organizing around the issue of child welfare disproportionality. During this time, I joined the NAACP and created the first child protection committee. I leveraged this position to meet with decision makers across the state with demands and recommendations to reduce disparities. I grew tired of “educating” leaders that were well aware of the problem in what was, in my opinion, begging them to address this long standing and well documented issue. I decided to address it at the legislative level.

In 2017 I wrote the African American Family Preservation Act, a bill that creates a standard for county agencies engaging the African American community. The bill works to stop the unnecessary removal of Black children from their homes. With the nonprofit organization I founded called Village Arms, we are currently piloting the bill in one of our largest and most diverse counties in Minnesota.

***Alia:*** Can you tell us about the pilot program and what that looks like?

***Kelis:*** We pulled four provisions from the act to focus on. (1) Safely reduce the disproportionate number of African American children removed from home or re-entering foster care. (2) Decrease the number of African American cases opened for ongoing case management. (3) Increase the number of African American children placed with non-custodial parents or relatives when out of home placement is the *only* viable safety option. (4) Increase frequency and timeliness of reunification for African American families by employing alternatives to CHIPS proceedings and TPR. We use safety plans, creative placement solutions, and family meetings to make informal arrangements and avoid removing children whenever possible. We leverage familial and community supports to safely close cases at investigation rather than relying on the child protection system to provide long term support.

***Alia:*** How is the pilot going? What has been successful?

***Kelis:*** We have served over 100 families to date. We’ve successfully closed cases at the investigative stage with a solid safety plan and support network in place. We’ve been able to deter family from ongoing case management, court involvement, and termination of parental rights. The bumps in the road have been a workforce that have been resistant to change. Among county leadership there is a genuine desire to reduce disparities and reach positive outcomes, but that sentiment has not necessarily trickled down to their workforce. We are helping workers get past their own racism to make more equitable decisions across cases. I knew getting into this work that change doesn’t happen overnight, and it would be a battle, but I am here for it.

***Alia*:** What does some of that pushback look like?

***Kelis:*** One major concern, especially in the beginning, were unfair stereotypes assigned to members of the family, sometimes in meetings prior to ever engaging with the family. Black fathers in particular can be villainized with assumptions made regarding their role in the family and the relationship with the mother. Black family separation has been a goal of this country since we were kidnapped and shipped here. What we are witnessing through the criminal justice and child protection system is the sustaining of that goal. It starts with racist thinking, unchecked bias and unfair assumptions based largely upon false stereotypes rather than facts and imminent harm. There is often a mistrust of the family and an unwillingness to share power and allow them to function as the experts on themselves that they are.

One other issue I am hoping is addressed through training and targeted hiring are the child welfare workers that transition from the criminal justice system. The “guilty, until proven innocent” stance is often carried over into the work with Black families. I always say it’s not just policy and law that are creating these issues but practice. It is the everyday decisions made by county workers that perpetuate disparities. The pilot encourages the system to slow down, address the work through a different lens and to really challenge the “remove the kids and ask questions later” culture that exists across agencies whenever the family is of African descent.

***Alia:*** What is the length of the pilot?

***Kelis:*** Three years. We are 1.5 years in.

***Alia:*** What is next for the pilot in terms of growth to other counties?

***Kelis:*** We intend to use the pilot’s evaluation data to inform the legislature and other county agencies of the pilot’s success, that it is possible to work with our families without removing our children and to demonstrate the importance of passing this legislation.

***Alia:*** What is the best way for others to get involved in this work?

***Kelis:*** We are supporters in Minnesota to contact their senators and representatives to *express* their support of the bill, urging him/her/them to sign on and stand behind it as well. For impacted parents/relatives, share your story with your elected officials. It is time we unveil what is occurring and to really start making noise around this issue, as some are unaware of how just how harmful the system truly is. Visit www.villagearms.org to contact us directly.

***Alia:*** Do you know of others doing this work at this level?

***Kelis:*** I am unaware of anyone working on reducing disparities in child welfare for families of African descent specifically. Much of the advocacy I’ve observed focuses on all children. The experience of those outside of our community is so vastly different that we cannot lump our issues together and get the results that WE need.

***Alia:*** We know there are challenges, but what are the benefits?

***Kelis:*** This position allows me to not only advocate for the people I love but to also make some long-term impacts on practice in a way that will lead to improved outcomes and sustained change.

***Alia:*** “Humanizing Black lives” – what is the vision and what would it look like if it were actually happening?

***Kelis:*** I know humanizing Black lives would have a great impact; it would make room for the compassion and empathy missing that is due to the history of this country. I think just bringing the lens to the work allows the social workers to get beyond the tunnel vision of the “crisis” or the problem. When the family is Black, agencies tend to focus on perceived deficits, but when you humanize those you serve, you can see beyond the issue that brought you to the door of the family. It helps you see the protective strengths the family has. In this country we aren’t allowed to make mistakes and our feet are held to the fire in ways others don’t have to. I see Caucasian lives humanized on a normal basis.

***Alia:*** What else can agencies be doing to better serve African American families?

***Kelis:*** Counties need to be willing to audit the work of their individual workers and use it as a training tool. Document where the disparities persist, which specific workers they are attached to, and create some targeted methods to work through what is causing inequity in their decision making. If a change in practice does not result, then those workers must be held accountable up to and including termination. In no other profession (outside of the police force) is an employee allowed to treat a “customer” different based on race or ethnicity, so child protection should be no different.

County agencies should use safety mapping at the investigative stage and *require*that the assigned worker focus on family strengths and protective factors to avoid deeper end involvement, court, out of home placement, or termination of parental rights. County agencies should be required to make intentional efforts to highlight those strengths and see beyond their struggles to take a more holistic approach to their work with our families.

***Alia:*** What does your work look like in the community outside of the office space?

***Kelis:*** The work I am now doing started on a volunteer basis. I still advocate for families that contact me if there has been a wrongful removal or wrongful kinship denial. I used to do a lot more, but I am listening to my capacity.

***Alia:*** What does wellbeing and self-care look like for you to keep going?

***Kelis:*** I tell my staff to prioritize self-care, practice not carrying the trauma of parents the parents we serve. I used to be in child protection mode as early as 6am to as late as 10pm every day, from when I woke up to when I went to sleep. I went through my own burnout and when faced with a personal traumatic experience I realized I didn’t have enough to respond to me because I was pouring so much out. I am in therapy now, take Sundays off (without guilt) and am listening to my body. I CARE but I don’t CARRY as I did before.

***Alia:*** What advice would you give to others in the system? How do you care and not carry?

***Kelis:*** God is everything to me. My spiritual background drives my work as a foundation for me. I use prayer and understand that it’s not on me if this does not come out as I intend. I am here to be a helper and to use my voice to advocate in any way that I can, rather than carry the burden myself. I take it personally when we are attacked based on race. I used to come in swinging and let the emotions of the family impact me in ways I didn’t realize. I still take it personally but now understand it’s not my problem alone to solve. I have to give it to God. It’s so hard knowing what is happening to these children when they are displaced from their families. I’ve seen depression, anxiety and I have had 3 or 4 deaths with families fighting through child protection and it’s a lot to hold. So, I use prayer a lot to center and not let it weigh me down so much that I am not helpful to anyone.

***Alia:*** Have you experienced pushback as a faith-based organization in this work?

***Kelis:*** There has not been a lot of pushback. I don’t have any fear as to speaking up about God’s role in my life. I give him honor in everything that I do. I was trying to have these conversations in 2014 and there have been so many strategic changes that I know is God.

***Alia:*** Are there ways for others to get involved in this work?

***Kelis:*** Yes! Village Arms is expanding and will be ready for volunteers and interns soon. [Minnesota One Stop for Communities](https://mnonestop.org/) takes mentors. For folks in other states, I encourage anyone to take the language of the AAFPA and tailor it to your state specifically as this is an issue across the country. I would also say focus on shelters, as kids are being displaced there during the transition.

***Alia:*** What is the best way to help the parents fighting this system?

***Kelis:*** Listen to the parents, ask what they need to address the issues that got the attention of child protection. It must start there. In CP, the cookie cutter case plans don’t work for everyone. Ask the family what their sense of wellbeing is and help them reach it. Most families are coming in for neglect, which could mean inadequate food, clothing, and shelter; providing concrete services and resources addresses this. These are not families unwilling to meet the needs of their child, but unable, that difference should determine whether that case is opened. Refer them for legal advice or representation, walk them through the complaint process when appropriate, show up in court, during meetings with county staff, make yourself available to help establish child safety and deter them from further involvement.

Child protection is created to intervene when children have been abused, not designed to address issues related to poverty. So when we go in for poverty, our intervention is off from the onset. Agencies must be willing to divert our families to the proper agency at the investigative stage once it is determined that that parent has not abused or intentionally “neglected” their child(ren).

***Alia:*** What percentage of the families you work with are placed because of poverty vs. abuse?

***Kelis:***In nearly all our pilot cases the issues are more closely related to poverty and/or mental health. We’ve served over 100 families and none were involved for actual abuse to a child by the parent. There were some physical abuse allegations in reports that proved to be false upon investigation, that were a direct result of bias by mandated reporters. The majority of our parents are willing to work with the county and our agency to address the “crisis” and establish child safety at investigation. (Even with a situation of molestation, a mother we worked with was immediately willing to remove herself and the child when she found out.) The solution requires that we slow down. Put down the paperwork, talk to the family, give voice to the family, include their support network in more meaningful ways, and ensure they are connected to the appropriate resources and providers, outside child protection.

Child protection is ill equipped to meet the needs of the families they serve because a majority of all parents involved, Black, White, Asian, etc, are non-abusive parents! [Data show](https://www.leg.mn.gov/docs/2020/mandated/200127.pdf) that of the thousands of children removed in Minnesota in 2018 only 9% were removed for physical abuse and 3% for sexual abuse This tells us that alternatives to immediate child removal can and should be explored. Not everything requires an immediate removal. The law is written in a way that should prevent this, but it’s more practice than policy.

***Alia:*** How can foster parents advocate for the families they are serving?

***Kelis:*** Start the fostering process with the understanding that the family is in the reunification stage and you are a temporary solution. Support the parents and understand that what you read in court docs is one side of the story, a side that is often exaggerated or misleading to ensure the family is ordered into court or their child into placement. It’s biased and is not the sum total of the family.

Children fare better both short and long term when left with biological relatives and foster parents have a unique opportunity to ensure this happens*. I suggest getting to know the parent for yourself while helping to facilitate connection between them and their child and offer supports and resources as you are able.* In addition, do not fight biological relatives that want to provide care for family members. There are thousands of children that need adopting, we should never be pursuing children those whose parents or relatives are present, engaged, willing, and able to provide care. The best foster parents form a relationship with the bio parents and become an additional support or caring adult for the child. Imagine yourself in their position and do what it is you would hope someone would do for you and your family.