

July 2024 APS TARC Podcast Transcript

Protecting the Protectors - Highlighting the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services Safety Unit

Introduction

Andrew Capehart: Welcome to the Adult Protective Services Technical Assistance Resource Center podcast. We come to you with the goal of sharing promising practices and innovations from the APS field, and to highlight what is achievable with new ideas and partnerships to help you envision what may be replicated in your program. Let's join our host, Jennifer Spoeri APS TARC subject matter expert and guests in conversation.

Discussion

Jennifer Spoeri: Welcome to the APS TARC podcast. Today we're going to be speaking with Lindsay Tomlinson, Director of Worker Safety Support at the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Lindsay, could you first give us some background on your path to supporting APS through the safety unit?

Lindsay Tomlinson: Absolutely. And thank you, Jennifer, for inviting us to be a part of this podcast and share the information about the great work that my team is doing and our, our agency is doing. But I guess to jump in. How did I get started in this profession? Well, I became a social worker because I like to help people.

Lindsay Tomlinson: And right out of college, I went into child welfare. And so, I served in a child welfare role doing investigations and supervision for. Uh, close to 10 years and then I kind of jumped over to more of the executive level doing policy, practice, training, legislative work, uh, for the agency. And then a couple of years ago, I took this position after becoming a certified co-active coach to try on my skills, um, with leadership as the director of worker safety support.

Lindsay Tomlinson: And so that's where my intersections with APS starts because the worker safety program at the department serves our entire agency. And that includes Child Protective Services, Child Protective Investigations. Adult Protective Services, our statewide intake program, as well as any state employees. So we cover, you know, close to 12,000 staff that are hired by the department.

Jennifer Spoeri: So it's a little small job. [laughs]

Lindsay Tomlinson: Yeah. I like, I like to think it is, uh, but we have a, we have a good time and we're really proud of the work that we're doing and how we're starting, you know, to really create a culture that wraps around our staff that they know that we're here and we care about their safety and their well-being.

Jennifer Spoeri: Absolutely. It seems like a logical connection too with your past work and then your future work and supporting all social workers. And protective workers in the state. So, 12,000 workers. You are a

giant state. Texas says go big or go home, right? To kick us off into the meat of this, how and when did the safety unit come to be and, and how is it funded?

Jennifer Spoeri: Tell us a little bit about this, because I'm sure there's some states that say, man, I'd like to have a safety unit.

Linsay Tomlinson: Yeah, so let me maybe frame it and tell you kind of what it is that we do, and then how we got started with it. So, so the purpose of the worker safety support program at DFPS is to, to truly focus on addressing workplace violence issues or safety concerns for our staff.

Linsay Tomlinson: And we do this primarily by providing support and resources after an incident has happened. Um, as well as there is an education component, which I think we will get into a little bit later. We're really trying to also front load the work that we do by being preventative, um, and educating our staff as they come into the agency around things to be aware of.

Linsay Tomlinson: This job has inherent dangers every day that our staff can walk into. So, we want to make sure that they understand what those are and how to handle those if, if they should happen. So, um, we got started a little over 10 years ago. Like, many things I think that happen in state government, there was a couple or some major incidences that happened.

Linsay Tomlinson: We had some high-profile assaults on staff in our state, which is always unfortunate that that is the way that programs have to get started. Um, but it was enough of an impetus for us to kind of start looking at a pilot version of worker safety because, you know, I think all of us that do this type of welfare work know that the threat is always there, but limited resources, things without, beyond our control in ways, financial resources, things of that nature kind of get in the way, but our agency made a commitment to pilot it.

Linsay Tomlinson: And then in 2015, we actually went to our legislature and asked our legislature for backing to have a few positions that would really formalize the division that we have within the agency, and that was granted. And then after collecting data for a few years and kind of showing the work that we were doing, we went back to the legislature and asked for additional positions.

Linsay Tomlinson: And so, the teams really, it's been growing and expanding and our roles and responsibilities with the amount of, uh, staff that I have, but we really kind of act as subject matter experts around safety, but also working with others within our agency that also have expertise in safety. Um, we participate on work groups, we deliver trainings, we do policy development, and we take on new safety initiatives for the agency that, that come.

Linsay Tomlinson:

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah, absolutely. That's a lot of work, but I just kept on thinking, wow, it's so nice to have first agency support and then the legislature's support that that's critical when you're looking for funding to

support something like that. Assuming the pilot went well and then you got to grow the unit so tell us about the positions within the unit and how it works like what who do you have in there.

Linsay Tomlinson: Yeah. So, the overall structure is there seven people on the team, including myself. So, we have the director, and then we have 14 members that we call worker safety program specialists. And we have one position that's a management analyst, and then all another position that is kind of a dual role, they, we have to have an information marketing kind of expert to get our information out there, but they also serve as a administrative officer, administrator of our, uh, safety app, our safety monitoring app. So, the four direct delivery, I call, I consider them more of our direct delivery workers because what they do is they actually feel the calls and the reports that come into our staff, uh, by our staff. So, they're the ones who reach out directly to the staff who have been impacted by these safety incidents or concerns, and they talk through that with them.

Linsay Tomlinson: They document that, um, So that we can keep successful data and then they offer them the supports and resources that the agency has to offer and they just kind of follow them for as long as is needed until the staff or employee feel that they've received what they needed support-wise, they, um, they're also primarily responsible for the educational component of the program.

Linsay Tomlinson: So, in our, in our attempts to be preventative, we offer some trainings to staff and to managers, and they are the ones that help write those and conduct those for our staff. Uh, in addition to those, we also have what I mentioned was a management analyst, and the best way I describe this individual is they're the one that tells our story of safety.

Linsay Tomlinson: They're the ones collecting the data. They're in our database pulling reports monthly that goes up to the executive team. And takes on our special projects that come in related to safety. So, this position is really it requires them to look at the trends and patterns and kind of forecast or have foresight on what might be coming up the road that we need to address as a safety team and bring that back to the team to talk about that.

Linsay Tomlinson: So, we can see if there's anything that we can do to address some of those trends and patterns. And recently, this person just finished revising our safety policy. So they really took a look at what our safety policies were, made it more comprehensive, made it more robust for our staff, did some research with other states looking at their safety policies to see maybe what we were lacking or may need to get a little more clear around.

Linsay Tomlinson: So that's the management analyst position. And then the last one, which is the kind of I call it the two for one hits our information specialist safety monitoring app administrator in this position, for us to be utilized, people have to know about us. So a lot of their role is creating ways to market and get our message out to staff.

Linsay Tomlinson: So, you know, within this last year, the staff member has worked to create quarterly newsletters. We have quarterly safety webinars, um, creating pamphlets, working on marketing packages to send out to our internal staff. So a lot of their role is doing that. Which is making us look good. And then their second part of that is we have a safety monitoring app that we offer all of our staff to use when they're in the field.

Linsay Tomlinson: So if they get in an emergency situation, they're one touch away from, uh, contacting law enforcement. So that position is responsible for making sure people get signed up, making sure they get training, making sure we're communicating changes. Um, that are going along with that app and they essentially kind of run that system.

Jennifer Spoeri: This is amazing for seven people across the state of Texas. It, you know, it sounds like, oh, no big deal, but there is a lot of moving parts here. And can I ask you a quick question about that app? Does the app because some programs I've heard are, you know, concerned about the workers out in the, in the houses and getting feedback that they're safe at the end of the visit after each visit, or even at the end of the day, does that app have a check in check out function or.

Linsay Tomlinson: It does not, it's simply, it's simply when it's turned on, it tracks their location as long as there's signal. And if there is an emergency, they can, they can have several options. They can alert and then the company that owns it will notify us if there is a...

Jennifer Spoeri: So the supervisor can see if there's in a house for eight hours and it's like, why isn't this moved?

Linsay Tomlinson: The supervisor does not. The, um, the, the vendor that owns the app is who is tracking them. They have people 24/7 that are monitoring our staff.

Jennifer Spoeri: Interesting. That's great because I just know I've heard some programs saying it's hard to just have all your investigators calling in after each visit or at the end of the day. But having this monitoring system is that's great.

Linsay Tomlinson: I think, uh, I mean, I think some of our teams and we talked to them. They've created like group chats and things of that nature. And they use their outlook calendars as well. And so they may just check in with emojis or different things to let people know that they're okay as, as a way to kind of do that.

Jennifer Spoeri: That's what the field does, right? APS always looks out for their own.

Linsay Tomlinson: We do. We're like a little, we're a family, right? The type of work we do bonds us together.

Jennifer Spoeri: It is so true. So, you said the unit becomes involved after an incident has occurred. Is the unit alerted through the app? I just am curious about how that happens or do they come back and send an email or a phone call?

Jennifer Spoeri: How, how do your guys become involved with the workers? Cause like you said, when we were discussing previously, you don't know something's happened unless somebody calls you or alerts you to it, you know?

Linsay Tomlinson: Yes. So, I would say yes and yes, there's many different ways that we can get alerted to something. Um, the primary way is typically after an incident has happened, we have a process.

Linsay Tomlinson: Our agency has an internal website system so they can fill out a report and it gets sent to us and we have a mailbox. They can call us directly if they want as well and that's typically the way that we'll receive a report after something has happened and then we'll reach out to them. As you mentioned though, I mean, we have lots of different relationships with different parts of the agency.

Linsay Tomlinson: So, we intersect with human resources. We intersect with a peer support program. We intersect with the facilities and maintenance and security. So, sometimes we'll receive information from them, like, say, you know, so and so just called me or I received this information. I wanted to make sure you were aware.

Linsay Tomlinson: Um, so like building relationships for worker safety and networking is very important so that we're not working in silos and we're exchanging that information amongst each other. The safety monitoring app there, they do notify us when things are alarms go off. So then we will follow up after we receive that email with the worker to see what has happened, make sure that they're okay and if they need any support resources.

Jennifer Spoeri: Got it. Got it. That's great. So can I take us back a little bit? And talk about training. I'm curious what kind of training is offered to, it's not just APS, but you know, we're going to focus on APS.

Jennifer Spoeri: What kind of training is offered by the safety unit? Just give us some examples.

Linsay Tomlinson: Yeah, this is an area that we've expanded on a bit in the last year or so. Uh, our, our primary training is a full day, eight-hour in person training, and we call it protecting the protectors. Um, and it covers several topics around safety, awareness, and so we're going to talk about your physical safety, like preparing to go out to the home.

Linsay Tomlinson: What do you do when you go to the home? What does situational awareness really mean when you're out in a home and you're working with people, right? De-escalation. How do you know when someone's escalating? How do you try to de-escalate them? Um, how our communication, uh, impacts the way that people respond. And so the, the power of language that we have.

Linsay Tomlinson: The way we just show up at a house and knock on the door type thing. I think what most staff really are interested in is our online safety component. And this is about educating on how people can locate you through the internet. I mean, technology is not going away and, and people, you know, we tell people just like we use the internet to find our clients, they use the internet to find us.

Linsay Tomlinson: And so we talk about Googling yourself and how your information ends up with different companies online so that people can find it for free. Um, so we, we do spend some time going into that and helping them, we call it lockdown, but helping them remove that information so that as little information as possible is on the web.

Linsay Tomlinson: That people can find for them. And then we go into just, you know, um, our policies. about how the agency views approaching certain situations, such as being video recorded by clients that happens sometimes, transportation safety, um, and then self-care. We always, we always kind of like to talk about, although we have a well-being manager, we like to talk about self-care and how safety and self-care kind of intersect.

Linsay Tomlinson: Um, and so we do offer them some information about resources and that's usually takes that's a pretty full day for our staff. Um, but sometimes we know that people don't have eight hours, right? When you do this job, it's. You have limited amounts of time and more work to do than you actually have time to do so we break up some of these sections into smaller trainings where we can go to like conferences or unit meetings and give a 30- or 45-minute presentation on a specific topic.

Linsay Tomlinson: Um, you know, sometimes people have asked, well, what do I do if someone calls, it makes a threat. Right. What about animal bites? What do I do when there's animals on the property? So depending on the topic and the subject, we can usually pull some information together and provide a short training.

Jennifer Spoeri: I just imagine you see differences in the regions within your state of what is requested. You know, you have urban areas and remote areas, and it's got to be interesting.

Linsay Tomlinson: Yeah, yeah, there's, the variant, the variance is good, um, and you're right, it does, it does become interesting at times, the things that you will see, you know, some, some areas are much more about online safety, some areas, there's more animals, so we get more animal bites from those areas, right?

Linsay Tomlinson: Right. Um, you know, it really just depends, but I think. Most areas kind of face the same, the same safety issues with their, with their clients. So we just hope that we're targeting the information that they really need that will help make them aware, but also keep them safe. Yeah.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah. That's, that's interesting and important.

Jennifer Spoeri: So, you mentioned a peer support program. Can you, can you tell us about that? Cause that sounds pretty innovative. Yeah. That's

Linsay Tomlinson: Yeah, and I, you know, I can't take responsibility for it. It's in a different, it's in a different part of the agency. And so I can, I can tell you a little bit about it, which is just, it's agency employees who have made a commitment to want to help other agency employees.

Linsay Tomlinson: So it's from within and these agency employees offer a very safe and nonjudgmental space. For people to share their experiences and receive support. So, I mean, we all know that working in this field and protective services is very emotionally challenging. It leads to feelings of burnout, compassion, fatigue, vicarious trauma.

Linsay Tomlinson: And so we want for this program gives back, whether it's a professional or a personal issue, they just aim to provide a listening ear, some practical coping strategies to help navigate or help our employees navigate through these challenging times. And we, we like to note that the staff do receive some additional training on trauma, but they're not licensed therapists or counselors so a part of their job obviously is to connect with them and help them feel supported, but also connect them with the appropriate resources. If further professional assistance is going to be needed to address what they're going through.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah. And like you said, they're an ear, but they also understand because they probably are, have been in those similar situations and they're doing the same or similar kind of work.

Jennifer Spoeri: So that's, that's great. And the fact that you provide them training, you're not just throwing them out there going, here, take a call with somebody who's just had a traumatic experience. No, you want, you give them some support as well. So you got to protect the protectors again.

Linsay Tomlinson: Yeah. It's a, it's a calling.

Linsay Tomlinson: There's an application process that people have to go through if they want to be a part. Of the peer support team. And it's because I've gone through the training. It is actually kind of modeled after a program that law enforcement has and law enforcements have been using. And so a commissioner or associate commissioner of ours a few years back, you know, kind of just pose the question.

Linsay Tomlinson: Well, if law enforcement can do this and our job somewhat, um, emulates what law enforcement has to do at times, not, not the exact same, but there are components that overlap. Why wouldn't we be able to do the same thing for our staff? And so that kind of planted the seed, I think, for us to look at trying to do this and it's an up and coming program as well, they're growing, um, staff are learning more about it as a support tool.

Linsay Tomlinson: And it kind of just goes to our overall mission of making sure safety and well-being is at the forefront for our staff.

Jennifer Spoeri: That's fantastic to hear. So kind of closing, getting closer to the closing, what does the future hold for your safety unit there in Texas?

Linsay Tomlinson: Oh, that is such a great question. I think there's endless, endless possibilities.

Linsay Tomlinson: And I dream about this a lot, um, and talk to my staff about it, but, you know, I think for us, then the next step, obviously we would like to grow and have more staff, but we recognize the role of

supervision, um, and managers and, and enhancing safety and making it a daily conversation with staff, uh, and not something that just, you know, happens when an incident happens.

Linsay Tomlinson: So we've kind of deemed this next year for us to be year of the supervisor and building upon what we already have in our safety culture, but digging in maybe a little bit deeper to work with managers around how are we giving our staff permission to have these conversations? How are we leaving that door open?

Linsay Tomlinson: What additional training are we making sure that we, that we have just, you know, to make sure that everyone has the resources that they need? I think. We're also looking at bringing some information in front of the legislature to make some changes. We've, over the last couple of years, found that there's some gaps in services and resources and things that we're able to offer staff around their safety.

Linsay Tomlinson: So we're looking at those areas to try to go to the legislature and see if maybe we can make some changes for our staff. But I think, you know, or I know, I guess that the vision of our commissioner right now in our leadership is, it's very strong about employee retention, employee safety, employee well-being.

Linsay Tomlinson: And so I think it's limitless, you know, when you have the support of those at the top, it's limitless on what you could potentially do and where you can go with it. So it feels, it feels very positive and very hopeful for our staff that we have a team that's just so committed to their safety and well-being right now.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah. That, that's huge. Like you said, you have the agency and legislature support, so that's fantastic. Well, anything else you'd like to add before we, we close anything on your mind?

Linsay Tomlinson: I just, I, I hope that everyone that wants to have a safety team is able to have one. Um. You know, if anyone has questions or wants to learn more about it, my team and I are more than willing to talk with you about the process.

Linsay Tomlinson: What we do get into more detail because I think. At the end of the day, all of us that do this work understand what it's like to have that lived experience. And we all want to do the best for for our staff. So, whether it's as large of a program that we have, and it's taken time to get there. Or even just starting very small.

Linsay Tomlinson: What is the smallest steps that you can take? Continue to try to do that for yourself because it makes a difference and it does matter to them.

Jennifer Spoeri: It does. And they need to know that you are, their safety is of the utmost importance because if they're not out there doing the work. That work's not getting done.

Jennifer Spoeri: So thank you, Lindsay, for your time and sharing so much good information on the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services Safety Unit. You're certainly protecting the protectors, as you said. I like that, that phrase. I'm sure our listeners have learned a lot and can take that back to their programs.

Jennifer Spoeri: And, um, again, thank you and hope everyone has a good day.

Lindsay Tomlinson: Thank you.

Closing

Andrew Capehart: Thanks so much for listening. The APS TARC is a project of the Office of Elder Justice and Adult Protective Services at the Administration for Community Living Administration on Aging Department of Health and Human Services, and is administered by WRMA, Incorporated a TriMetrix Company in partnership with the National Adult Protective Services Association. Contractors' findings, conclusions, and points of view do not necessarily represent the official policy of the Federal Government. To give us feedback on this podcast or reach out to us, please visit our website at apstarc.acl.gov.