

November 2024 APS TARC Podcast Transcript

A Conversation with Kari Benson, ACL's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Aging

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 have a conversation with the Administration for Community Living's newish deputy assistant secretary for aging, Kari Benson. Thank you, Kari, for taking the time from your very busy schedule to speak with us and share your thoughts on your first now 10 months at ACL? So to begin, I thought I'd share a little bit before I let her take over. I thought I'd share a little bit of what Edwin Walker wrote about Kari Benson coming on board at ACL, and what ACL was looking for. So to begin, what they were looking for, we sought a leader who shared those values about the work and responsibilities of ACL and the role of the person leading the Administration on Aging. We also wanted a person who values collaboration and partnerships between organizations and across networks, and whose experience putting that value into action. Finally, we of course wanted a professional with extensive and direct experience with Older Americans Act and related aging programs. So that's a lot. And with that, Kari, can you please tell our listeners about yourself and about your journey to becoming ACL's deputy assistant secretary of aging?

Kari Benson: Well, Jennifer, thank you so much for having me on the podcast. This is really fun for me to be able to do and tickled that you asked to hear about me and, and hear about my time here at ACL. My background is in human ecology and with a minor in gerontology, and so I have been really interested in and focused on working in the aging services network, aging services and gerontology writ large, for my entire career, and it is really steeped in the human ecological framework, where I got really grounded in that in my bachelor's degree, and it's really served me well and, and provided for me the vantage point or kind of the perspective or lens that I use in the work that I do, overall, in the human ecological framework, the person is at the center. So if we think of older adults or other adults at risk of abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, and so on, that person is at the center. Surrounding them is their family and friends, other close supports, and then concentric circles kind of surround them, right, where you've got the community, you've got the region, the state, the federal, you know, all the different systems, policies, programs that impact them. So I really caught the aging bug early on, even before getting my bachelor's degree, with personal experience and caring for and trying to help

older relatives, and then, including my dad, navigate the systems and seeing where improvements were needed to be made to better support him, better support his choices, better support my mom, better support other caregivers. And so really got very interested in working at the policy or more the macro level in my work. And so I got really lucky after getting my bachelor's degree, I went right into getting my master's at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs in Minnesota, where I was born and raised. If you can't tell for my accent, but ...

Jennifer Spoeri: Oh, you betcha, right?

Kari Benson: Oh, you betcha.

But I, you know, I went right into getting my master's because I got so excited about working at the policy or the systems level, and got lucky enough to have my first internship at the state level, and was really off and running from there in terms of work at the state level. And then had an earlier stint at the Administration on Aging, before it became ACL, where I've come back to now.

Jennifer Spoeri: Come back home, right?

It's funny how we all end up in aging disability services because of some experience when we were like a teenager or helping a family member. You know, it's just, you get that bug, like you said.

Kari Benson: It is so true, isn't it? Really, just, yes, I've heard that from so many others in the field that you just, you really, your eyes are opened, and then you see really the potential, right, for all of us to age in the way that we want to and, and for people with disabilities too, right, for any one of us that we might need some support and services, and being able to get those in the way that makes the most sense, right?

Jennifer Spoeri: Absolutely. And then the person-centeredness of it is why I fell in love with adult protective services. And I know there's many other programs that are very person-centered, but you know, APS is very unique, and that sometimes you're giving that person that choice, and you would disagree with them. So it's, it's a tough.

Kari Benson: Absolutely. Yeah, it's at the, it's core to the work of APS, isn't it? To really put that person at the center? And yeah. And I, like I said, with the human ecological framework that's just deeply ingrained in it, you know? Person is at the center and calling the shots, whether you agree with them or not.

Jennifer Spoeri: That's the rub, yep. So tell us about the Office of Elder Justice and Adult Protective Services, because it's kind of probably a mystery to some of our listeners out there, but I know it's got resource centers, but I won't steal your thunder. Tell us about the OEJAPS, as we call it.

Kari Benson: Right, right. And we do try to just really, you know, say the full name, right? Because, like you did, you know, as you introduce the topic, because it is, I think, a really well-kept secret as far as the Administration for Community Living, the work that we do overall. I know from coming from, you

know, spending quite a few years back at the state level before returning to ACL, I wasn't even fully aware of the breadth of work that the Office of Elder Justice and APS did, because it's pretty remarkable. So would love to tell you all about it. The easiest place to start is the fact that they are the administrator and the oversight entity for adult protective services, right? So that's really where the staff, team, and leadership live in ACL as the federal home for adult protective services, and then, as you referred to, Jennifer, that they have the benefit of congressional investment in APS by also having the investment to fund resource centers that provide support to adult protective services programs at the state and local or regional local levels.

And so the staff team works very closely, in particular, with the APS TARC, but also, you know, a wide range of resource entities that both serve to provide technical assistance in terms of the now formula funding provided to states and territories for the APS programs, but then provide TA, training, assistance, support, guidance to the adult protective services network nationally in a variety of ways. And so they're extremely important partner for us and really augment what we are able to do with relatively limited capacity, you know, at the federal level, within the ACL and within the Office of Elder Justice and APS. But as the name suggests, that office also oversees additional programming and services for older adults related to elder justice and elder rights, including pension rights counseling as well as economic security, women and economic security, in particular. And so quite a range of programs and offerings that office makes available to older adults, to family members, to, for some of them, adults age 18 and older nationwide.

The other thing that I will mention is that they staff and coordinate the federal level Elder Justice Coordinating Committee, and that's a very important entity that brings together many federal agencies. I believe I've got the number correct if I say 16, I could be off by one or two, but many federal agencies who have a role to play in upholding and promoting the rights and protections for older adults. And so that committee has been instrumental in pushing forward systems changes, especially those that cut across federal agencies. But it's also, as its name suggests, been very important in terms of creating the environment within which it's easier for the federal agencies to coordinate their efforts. So very much a core part of what they do at the Elder Justice Coordinating Committee. There's an elder justice working group that provides direct staff support with senior staff from across all of the participating agencies, and they really are the entity that come together and push forward the additional systems changes, systems improvements, and investments we need to really fully build out our elder justice and elder rights system.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah, thank you. And I know a lot of these elder justice centers, and even you know with me at NAPS, they provide such good information to one another to almost create like their own little multidisciplinary team under the blanket. You know?

Kari Benson: That's exactly right. That's exactly right. I have often thought of it that way too. It's like the federal version.

Jennifer Spoeri: MDT.

Kari Benson: Yeah.

Jennifer Spoeri: And for the listeners, if you want to check it out online, it's elderjustice.acl.gov. I pulled up that website and so you can see all the different resource centers, because there's a number of them. You know, the elder National Center on Law and Elder Rights, Center on Elder Abuse, the Ombudsman Resource Center. I mean, there's so many good things here, and the Native American Elder Justice Initiative. So on that note, we'll shift gears a bit here. And during your time in Minnesota, particularly, I imagine you had the opportunity to work with tribes or tribal APS. Could you share with us a little bit about that?

Kari Benson: Yes, I would love to, Jennifer. I did, and I learned so much from the tribal nations that we worked with, and I worked with them in a number of different ways, but one area in particular that was really exciting for us, as more federal funds were being made available to states to help us build out our adult protective services systems, we were really able to benefit from that, of course, building out the state system, but also beginning discussions early on in that process with the tribes. So in Minnesota, we have 11 tribal nations that overlap the same geography as the state, and so we tried to work really closely with each of the 11 tribes. And so early on in the process of the different funding being made available from ACL for APS, we worked really closely with the tribal nations to see what their preferences were, what were their interests? What were their needs for adult protective services within their tribes? And what we wanted to learn from them is how they wanted to move forward. And we really just stepped back and gave them that opportunity, and of course then provided whatever information, resources that they would find helpful, connected them with probably some of those national resource centers, other experts in the field to really gain an understanding for themselves of what it could look like for them if they wanted to, to even build out their own adult protective services system for their members. So early on in the process, we knew that some of the tribes had agreements with the counties where they received the reports of potential maltreatment from our common entry point, so that they were the ones who got the report. They were then able to take the necessary steps to address that report. And, you know, of course, we've provided training and support and technical assistance for that.

Some of those tribes wanted to do more. They wanted to be able to have funding available for themselves to build out their system more fully, right? So they had otherwise been kind of, you know, piecing it together, as we all had been, frankly, right, depending on if we had some state funding, if there were other funding sources, you know, that we were able to kind of put into the mix. But eventually, then, in our process of working through the planning process that ACL had all states working through, and then, of course, working through the different funding allocations that we received, we were able to direct some of that funding to the tribes so that they could use a portion of it to start building out their systems. So my understanding is there's maybe a few tribes now in Minnesota who are doing that work and building out those systems. Of course, I know the vision is

ultimately that all 11 tribes, if they want, would be able to have their own systems, right, so that they could receive reports of potential maltreatment and then have the capacity to fully review and respond, to potentially investigate, but also remediate and have that community response, have that capacity all within their tribes' purview and responsibility and authority.

Jennifer Spoeri: Gotcha. Yeah, I know Peggy Joe Archer had the panel at the conference of all the tribal APS, and it's fascinating. We can all learn from one another, because, you know, they handle things a little differently, and maybe we could learn how to better handle things from them. So, you know, we're all learning, always, so.

Kari Benson: Always.

Jennifer Spoeri: Very tribal, centered, right?

Kari Benson: Yes, yes.

Jennifer Spoeri: So I was wondering what your vision was, and I know you're, you're still newish, like I said, but how do you see the federal agencies bridging the current gap between disability services and aging services, because APS is in both sides of this bridge.

Kari Benson: Yes, absolutely it is. You know, as we've noted previously, right? Most all the states, their APS programs do serve individuals age 18 or older that fit certain criteria, right? So, absolutely. It's very much an aging and disability program. And you know, when I first was at AOA in the early 2000s Administration on Aging, it was just AOA at the time, just a standalone operating division within HHS. Subsequently, after I left, ACL was established, and it brought together programs serving older adults as well as programs serving people with disabilities, typically under the age of 60. But you know all different, you know, eligibility criteria and what have you, right, but really with that common mission, right, of ensuring that community living is possible, and really it's a right for anybody who is in need of some services and supports, either with their personal care or maybe some help around the house or for other reasons, you know, needing some additional help on a daily basis or a regular basis.

And so that common mission is what brought aging and disability programs together at ACL, and we find that we are more powerful when we are working together in terms of informing policies and programs across our sister agencies within HHS as well as other federal agencies, as well as just raising awareness, providing education about community living, we have a much stronger voice when we come together to really undertake that type of education, awareness raising advocacy, and there are many opportunities to coordinate our service delivery, coordinate our support of states, many of whom, you know, are agencies or divisions within their agencies that are probably doing aging and disability programs, often, not always, but to really do the most effective job we can in supporting states and really building out their systems of services and supports across all populations and across the lifespan. So there are many opportunities, some of which we feel we have really start to realize as an agency. But ACL is still young in and of itself, and so I'm excited to be back at ACL now that it has the

broader or more inclusive mission, and have started working with my peers in ACL to identify some next best steps in terms of areas that we can work on together, bringing together aging and disability partners, and really having some more of those conversations about what interests and challenges do we hold in common and what makes sense for us to work on together?

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah, yeah, sharing that information because we're all in our own little world, you know, and sharing that information that the other person might have some good insight on, it's huge.

Kari Benson: Absolutely.

Jennifer Spoeri: Communication, right?

Kari Benson: Yes.

Jennifer Spoeri: Communication's gotta be the key to human ecology, right?

Kari Benson: Yes, really connecting the dots, right?

Jennifer Spoeri: Mm, hmm, yep, that macro view so well, anything else you'd like to add before I close? I didn't know if you had any parting thoughts. I do have something I'd like to share, but I wanted to give you a last.

Kari Benson: I, you know, I don't think so. Just I'm excited to be at ACL. I think, you know, I was just doing a little bit of math. I'm getting pretty close to my 10th month in the position, and so still really new and just very excited to be in the position, learning from everyone, learning from yourself and others at the national and federal level, in terms of all the different efforts underway, as well as the issues, challenges, opportunities we have before us. So I could not be more excited to be able to have a role in the aging services network, have a role in adult protective services across the lifespan. I think we have a lot of really exciting opportunities in front of us as we roll out the regulations, but also as we roll out the various initiatives and the shared vision we all have, right, for really upholding rights and protections for everybody. So excited to be here, and I just really appreciate you giving me a chance to join your podcast.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah, of course, and it's got to be better weather in the D.C. area than up in northern Minnesota or Minnesota period.

Kari Benson: It depends. It depends on how much you like that snow and winter, which, of course, you know having grown up there, I really love.

Jennifer Spoeri: I do too. You can have those 90-degree temperatures, but.

Kari Benson: That's right.

Jennifer Spoeri: Well, thank you, Kari. And to close, I want to again quote Edwin Walker, because I thought what he wrote about you, when he introduced you in the position, was really, really nice. He

said, Kari brings together the experience, passion, and leadership qualities the aging network needs to continue forward in the future. Her passion for aging began with experiences of loved ones who struggled to maintain their independence while needing help around the house or with their personal care. Kari knew early on that she wanted to help people to age well and live well at home. I think we can all agree that the future is looking bright with you, Kari Benson, at the helm. So thank you and thank you listeners. Everyone, have a good day.

Kari Benson: Thanks, Jennifer. Thanks everybody.

Closing

Andrew Capehart: Thanks so much for listening. To give us feedback on this podcast or reach out to us, please visit our website at [APSTARC.acl.gov](https://apstarc.acl.gov). This podcast was created by the Adult Protective Services Technical Assistance Resource Center, administered by WRMA Inc. under contract number 140D0424F1178, from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living, Administration on Aging. Special acknowledgement to the National Adult Protective Services Association, who contributed to this podcast. The views expressed in this podcast do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Administration for Community Living or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.