

Deborah: [00:00:00] Today, Utah Foster Care Communities, how you can become part of it. Next on fostering conversations.

Hi, I'm Deborah Lindner.

Liz: And I'm Liz Rivera, a Director of Education here at Utah Foster Care.

Deborah: We've been talking about Utah foster care communities for a long time, and now they are in full swing. We're going to be talking about how you can become part of it. And Liz, this is something that we've been working on a long time.

Liz: We have, and I actually would say we as a very general we, because I feel like this has actually been the project [00:01:00] of other folks who we're going to talk to today to really hear about how this came about and what's next.

Deborah: We have with us the person who has been directly responsible for organizing and looking at how we can actually do this eventually statewide. Tami Carson is Director of Care Communities. It is a two-year pilot program that is the brainchild of First Lady Abby Cox. And we also have the Sorensen Impact Institute, who's part of the effort, and they're looking to provide better outcomes for Children who've experienced trauma and find themselves in foster care.

Tami, welcome today.

Tami: Thank you so much for having me. I'm happy to be here.

Deborah: Well, what do foster families? What have been they've been telling us for a long time that they really need?

Tami: It's a great question and Liz has been in this field and profession so much longer than I have. I know she's heard from families as they go through training and then as [00:02:00] she has had that additional contact with them. I had time working in our retention department before I took this position as the Director of Care Communities, and I felt like There are common themes for all foster families.

The type of parenting that they do is unique. It has challenges that other parents don't have. I've always thought of it as parenting on steroids with a whole lot of extra emotion built into it because they are caring for children who have experienced trauma and for them to just ask for their child to join a carpool

doesn't look the same as another family when they ask for their child to join the carpool because maybe that child has some behaviors or brings up topics of conversation that look different than other children.

All of those simple parenting tasks that maybe when I was a parent, I thought, oh, this is so much work. I realized for our foster families has. added layers of complexity. And they [00:03:00] have to address everything in their lives through that lens of, is this a safe environment for my child? Are the people in the environment of my child going to understand them and understand their behaviors without judgment?

Are there tools that I can give people in my life to help? And to add that to the bandwidth of everything else they're doing? Sometimes feels insurmountable for them and they just need more people in their life who can understand what they're going through. As I was building this program, I talked to a lot of foster parents that I come to know over the years and new foster parents.

And I said, if I could give you a team of eight to 10 people to help you. What would you want? And their list, though, it sounds familiar to other families list underlying that was but give me people who will understand. Give me people that when I call them because dinnertime fell apart, aren't judging me, but are saying, I've got you and you go be present with the kids.

[00:04:00] You need the mental bandwidth and capacity to be with those children. Make your priority, helping them in that moment. So, their needs, though they sound similar, have that added layer of understanding and acceptance for the work that they're doing.

Liz: It's a beautiful encapsulation. And one thing is you're talking, I was thinking about is, you know, we have a whole department at Utah foster care that's responsible for going out in the community and recruiting families to do foster care. But that's, you know, family by family. And what you're doing is actually in many ways on a grander scale because you're not recruiting one family, you're recruiting a team of eight to 10 people to surround that one family.

So, you're doing about eight to 10 times the recruiting per foster family that, that Utah foster care is doing, bringing foster parents in.

Tami: I hadn't thought of it that way, Liz, but that's absolutely true. And I did start in recruitment when I started at Utah foster care, but it is a similar process. I think of all those hundreds of [00:05:00] conversations I had with people who

wanted to be foster parents, and then all those hundreds of conversations with foster parents, and you're right.

We are gathering people who are willing to step into a space and understand the unique needs of children in care and the unique work of foster care.

Liz: It's just so exciting because it just expands the reach of the work we're doing that so many more individuals are going to understand better foster care because of this program that you're creating besides the support that the foster families are going to get.

Tami: Yeah, a beautiful unintended consequence and outcome of this program.

Deborah: it's so necessary because as we have mentioned in past podcasts, a lot of foster parents stop fostering after one year. A recent survey says nationwide, as many as 40 percent of Are only able to foster for one year. Now, there are many different reasons for that, but shouldn't we be trying to keep [00:06:00] experienced foster families?

Tami: absolutely. The more experienced a family is, the more capable they feel of doing this work. And the fact that nationwide we're losing so many. Feels like a problem we can and should solve. It's important. It's one of the most important things we do in the state of Utah is to care for vulnerable children, and this piece of it feels solvable.

Let's give foster families direct support from their religious community, their community at large, a business in their community, and let's support them through this. That's such

Liz: Let's talk a little bit about the communities that you're building around these foster families. How are you recruiting these care teams? How is that coming together?

Tami: a great question. We had a. Contacts primarily through existing relationships for the first phase of the pilot, including Utah, first lady, Abby Cox, who connected us with the area [00:07:00] presidency of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We had two Latter day Saints stakes participating in the first phase of the pilot.

We had connections through Mrs. Cox with first Presbyterian downtown, and they became our first Presbyterian church. And then we had. A pastor and his

wife who are foster parents in another Presbyterian congregation and we are so grateful they agreed to be another part of the program.

So, we built a care team from their congregation and then through two strong business partnerships we have in the community with Entrada and with Western States Lodging. They were willing to pilot this program. So as we've launched into this next phase of adding 30 or more statewide, again, we're partnering with the area presidency from the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and they've given us significant support and endorsing this program.

So we have many Latter-day Saint stakes joining. And through those connections, we're finding a few other [00:08:00] churches who are willing to say yes. Now, what we really need are more business partners who will step into this space. So we'll be tapping into existing relationships with business partners. We have built an advisory board for the care communities program and are filling that with religious leaders and business leaders in the community who can help us connect and find more business partners to pilot this program with.

Deborah: So each congregation is considered a care community.

Tami: Yes, absolutely. So each organization builds one care team to surround one foster family with eight to ten people from that organization. There are organizations who have said, can we do a second team? Yes, the answer is yes. We'll find you a second foster family to serve. But let's start with one, one organization, one care team serving one foster family.

Liz: one thing we've talked about is that there, there are similar models in other states, but most of them are primarily, if not completely faith based. Why do [00:09:00] you want to branch out from congregations, from faiths to businesses and community groups?

Tami: I love that question. Thank you, Liz. I would credit that to Nikki McKay, our CEO. And as this program was being talked about for a couple of years before the position was created, and I had this opportunity that was on her radar. We need to make sure this works everywhere because We know children coming to care could be from a variety of backgrounds.

We know that our foster families are from a variety of backgrounds, and we know that better outcomes happen when we have matches with existing religious backgrounds and cultures. And I think when I look at Utah. I absolutely believe that we are diverse, and we have diversity in religion. We have diversity in faith and those who may not be attached to a religion, but who

are absolutely attached to the idea of serving [00:10:00] and caring for, and they need the same opportunity that everyone else has to serve.

So that's been a Key foundational piece since the beginning. I'm so grateful for the organizations who are doing this work around the United States. And several of them were willing to meet with us and give us great advice and dig into how they're doing it. And at the same time, knowing we needed to do some things differently in Utah.

Liz: That's wonderful. So, there's two questions, more questions I have for you. I'm not sure what you want to go with first. I guess, let's go with a few stories first. Let's hear some of some stories that have emerged from the initial pilot of those six, care communities.

Tami: Yeah. I love stories. They're my favorite piece of this. I was really fortunate to be in a meeting yesterday with the advisory board for the show up team of Mrs. Cox and it was sharing facts with them, but really it was stories that mattered. And that's where the connection happens when we see that. I remember even back to being interviewed for this position, it was stories that I brought with me of, I know this is [00:11:00] what our families need.

I know That these children matter. So one of my, I have so many favorites. I can never say favorites. It's like saying a favorite child. And for my children, when they listen to this, they know, I don't say I have a favorite child. So I don't have a favorite, but some that stand out to me when I think about a teen boy, who has Significant challenges, making friends and keeping friendships.

It doesn't have the same skills that his peers have. And he's being surrounded by a couple who are the care team leaders out there. And the couple have talents. They're willing to share with this teen boy, including teaching this young man how to play guitar.

And he's doing so in partnership with his parents to say, when is a good time? How can I make this be something that works into your lives? And foster mom said, has to be when his homework's done. So they make sure that's how it happens. That same couple took him bowling

an experience that's challenging [00:12:00] for him. Not having the same social skills. And yet they talked with foster mom and dad before they left to go bowling. And they said, here are. The phrases that we use with him, when that behavior becomes challenging, we say this.

So I meet with care team leaders twice a month. And I want to mention here that Amy Boyack is over the care teams in the Salt Lake area. She's our care communities coordinator in this area. And she meets with care team leaders twice a month, and we get to hear these stories. It's amazing. My favorite thing.

See, I just said favorite again. My favorite thing is to watch People who have now become trauma informed who have now said to foster mom and dad, what does this young man need? And then they go bowling and they do that thing. They use those phrases. They encourage him. They hold boundaries where those need to be held.

And they're learning from foster mom and dad, what that looks like. This is another one that's so beautiful. And in fact was highlighted [00:13:00] in our Instagram account where it was time for potty training and the family had a new puppy. This is in the Presbyterian congregation and that care team said, what can we do to help?

Well, they came and took the puppy and they puppy sat for a few days so that potty training could happen and foster mom and dad could focus on that child in that moment and what they needed. I think of a single foster mom who has five teenagers in her home. And she's a schoolteacher. And already gives her heart to children. And that care team has done things like on Mother's Day, they came and made jewelry with the children to give to mothers, to all the mothers in their life.

Not just foster mom. They came with 20 people from their business and organized her garage, which empowered her to tackle the closets in her house. I think about another single foster mom. Who had people that would run to the pharmacy at any [00:14:00] hour, any time of the day or night when COVID hit, when groceries were low, when she needed air in the tires of her car. Those are the kinds of things, those are the stories, those are the examples, some of the examples. And that's just the surface. That's a few examples of the ways in which people are stepping into this space and saying, what do you actually need help with? And let me show up in that way. So

Deborah: That's like having that neighbor you know, it's so much more, but

is it harder to do that in rural versus communities in an urban setting in Utah.

Tami: So far, my answer is no. I think there are different challenges in a rural area. I think when you look at a faith community in an urban area, typically live close to each other in the Latter-day Saint stakes, they could be down the street.

But our first Presbyterian congregation is [00:15:00] spread all over. So in a sense, they're almost rural because they're spread all over.

I think the proximity of the foster parent to the organization has more impact than whether it's rural or urban.

Liz: So when you're recruiting, you're looking at the communities in which the foster parents live and exist already.

Tami: That's the ideal, but it's possible. Sorry, Liz, I didn't mean to interrupt you,

Liz: Go ahead. Go ahead.

Tami: it's, it works when it's not that way, but it has more complexity to it because We look at travel time and all of those things. That's true. When we're looking at a business that they are keeping in mind that the foster parents are serving may live 20, 30 minutes from their business.

And we need to be careful about what we ask of people in this program.

Liz: So let's talk a little bit about recruitment of these care teams. So you're, I know you're out in the community, you're talking to a lot of different organizations. What are you saying to them? What are you sharing with them to encourage them to become a part of this program?

Tami: Stories are the best place to start. [00:16:00] And if we can make it local for them, make the. The need local, that's something I learned from one of the organizations back in the South that spoke with us at the beginning of this process, they said, localize the need. And when we can see someone in the story, then we can see ourselves in the story.

We can imagine ourselves being that foster parent. We can imagine it's the child on ours. children's soccer team or in our classroom at school or in our class at church. And then we see ourselves in this story. People are so good. And I truly believe in Utah people are exceptionally good at service. They don't know how to do it and they need the help and the support to do it. So if I start with the story of here's the need, And then we can talk about the strengths of that organization. And we can talk about how they're already doing life. If they're an organization that foster parent belongs [00:17:00] to, that's an easier bridge because that's someone who's a part of their life, but even when they aren't a part of their life, helping them feel a connection to the need is key.

And those that have said, yes, I believe that's why they've said yes.

Deborah: And what kind of education component goes into this when you're trying to get people to understand trauma and, you know, withhold maybe judgments about certain things? What is involved in that?

Tami: we're so fortunate in Utah foster care to have Liz as our director of education. When we were looking at other programs and their trainings and all the beautiful things they're offering. I knew that we already had that here in Utah foster care, that Liz has the heart of inviting people beautifully into this space.

With understanding and education. So that was essential to me that we include that in the whole part of the process. And [00:18:00] I also wanted a model for relationship building. You know, when you just said, how do we get people to step out of judgment, built a model based on the feedback from foster parents includes unconditional acceptance. building safety into relationships and then inviting our foster parents to be vulnerable. So that's a piece of the education is let's practice that model. I would really love for Liz to share with us what has gone into, as she's built that training with me, what's gone into it and what's been important to her to include.

Liz: Thank you. That's you kind of turning the mics around and asking me a question I just cannot say what a privilege it's been to be a part of watching this program grow and watching you shepherd it from an idea to reality. I still remember that very first. So what we've kind of created is a online initial, this is the program.

Here's the basics. And then that in person let's dive deeper into, as Deborah talked about talking about trauma and building that [00:19:00] understanding that they're going to deal with it. To share with the foster family and the children in their care. And I still remember that first training in person.

We did it. The first Presbyterian church downtown salt Lake. It was cold. It was snowy. It was one of the, I don't remember. I think it was. Maybe January, maybe it was actually, I don't know. We had so much still last year. It could have been November, December, but it was our first one.

And I still remember sitting there thinking just to see something real that, you know, you had been working on this for so long, you'd been talking about this. You'd been deep in the process of creating it and then to see this thing come into fruition. And then not only that, but the fact that.

Everything you envisioned was happening. These are, you used the term leaning in and I love that. They were leaning, literally leaning in. They wanted to know more. They wanted to understand. And I think we've set up the, particularly that in person training where the foster family is there and we're starting to build that care plan and we're doing a deeper dive into trauma.

I think we really have wanted to create something that [00:20:00] in itself was community building, that this group is now has a shared understanding. Yes it's the kind of information we're sharing with all of them, but in any given group, an identity emerges that is that groups and understanding and language.

And just sort of, you know, the big word now is vibe, you know, just that, that group vibe and to watch that happen. And so that was our first one. And we've done five more since then, and we have more on the schedule in the next couple of months, but I am constantly amazed at how the groups that you have recruited are.

And so when we go in and we start talking a deeper dive into trauma, these are people who want to be there. These are people who want to understand and to share such important heart work and soul work with people who really want to be there and really be a part of it has just been an honor of a lifetime.

And I am so grateful that you've asked me to be a piece of this work

Tami: thank you. It [00:21:00] wouldn't be what it is without you, Liz, and without your ability to help all of us want to lean into understanding trauma and seeing ourselves in that experience. I remember in that first training There was a woman who had a light bulb moment for herself when we talk about an ACE score, you know, adverse childhood experiences, and she had this awareness about herself that she'd never had before and walked away from that, seeing herself in that teenager they were going to be serving.

And I don't know if you remember this Liz, but at The training at Cottonwood Presbyterian afterwards, our coworker, Terumi who came to act as a facilitator and help called it the grandma mafia. And I love that because what happens so organically, and I love that word vibe is now you have a room full of people who have a bridge between the good they want to do for others and actual people to serve and a way to serve them.

And it [00:22:00] creates a group dynamic of community. Like you said,

Liz: I love that.

Deborah: It's not just a one time thing.

Tami: It's not, that's the beginning. That's the beginning of the life of that care team. And I can't say that's what happens. And then for one year, it's that consistent. And we all have this beautiful experience. It's hard work. We're asking people to do hard things and the. Interest level of the care team ebbs and flows with their personal life.

There are times they're more busy and it's harder for them. And there are times when it's too much for them. Amy Boyack and I talk about this a lot is the key are the care team leaders. The two people who are leading that team and us having an ongoing relationship with them, because three or four months in when the magic of that moment, might start to.

Yeah. Eb a little instead of flowing. Then those care team leaders can really dig in to engage everybody and say, here are the needs. And hopefully by that point, our foster parents are [00:23:00] able to be more vulnerable and even dig deeper into what their needs are. And then we revitalize it.

It's a constant process like anything in life of revitalizing, going back to the root of where we created that feeling of community, giving it life in that ongoing process of serving that family.

Liz: So let's talk a little bit about the commitment that we are asking from these care communities. When they sign up, what are we asking them to do?

Tami: we are asking them to serve a family for a year. It could be shorter. Some families only need that service six months, and then they're more established into their community. A year is what we're asking. We're asking for two individuals to lead each team. And their time commitment is the most significant because each week they will be checking in with those foster parents throughout the week.

Those care team leaders do not need to go do all of that service. Some of them have the bandwidth to dive in and be the babysitter, cook the meal, attend the [00:24:00] soccer game. Some don't and that's okay. Their main role is organizing the rest of the team and being the advocate for the foster parents and the children in that home.

So their job is checking in throughout the week. Arranging things. having there be some kind of schedule and structure that foster parents can rely on

connecting with those care team members. For the care team members, it really varies, and we want them to bring to this work, their strengths and availability.

They may be a once a month person, they may say, I am a once a month home cooked meal person. I say this everywhere. I am not your home cooked meal person any longer. I'm your door dash person, but I would definitely am in the stage of life. If I was on a care team, let me come to the soccer game. Let me come sit by a child while they do homework.

There are lots of Ways that in my stage of life, I could dig into this. We have people who want to do projects [00:25:00] and clean in the house or organize the garage, and they're happy to do that once a week, send me in once a week for that. We have people that want to watch children and may even want to work up to getting the background screening and necessary steps to watch children overnight in the home of that foster family. So availability is. variable based on the member of the care team and their level of commitment they can give at this time?

Deborah: So if someone is listening out there and they want to become a part of it should they go to their business their place of faith?

Tami: Yes. Absolutely. The answer is yes. If you feel inspired by this, if something about this program or process touches you, or you know, a foster family and you want them to have a care team, look at where their community lies and that point of contact. I'm not at the stage yet. The dream is this will happen.

I'm not at the stage yet where an [00:26:00] individual person can call and say, put me on a care team. Not quite there. We'll get there right now. We're at, I want to be a part of this. Here's my workplace. And I think we can talk them into doing this. Will you come talk to our boss, you know, or if you're a Latter day saint, talk to one of your stake leaders and find out if your stake is participating or plans to participate.

Any state can participate. We have started with those who have hopefully enough foster parents within their stake boundaries that we can match them with one. If you're of another faith, introduce us to your pastor or leaders, the elders in your church, whoever are the ones that make those decisions about where to invest their time and what ministries they're going to serve. That's the way to start right now is connect us with a group that could partner with us to build a care team.

Liz: One thing that one of our foster moms said who had a care team is, and I may be misquoting her, so correct me if I get it wrong, but [00:27:00] she said something like this care team has allowed me to move out of survival mode because she felt like she was just getting by day to day and now she was actually able to move out of that because of the help she received.

Tami: absolutely. Yes. I remember my first conversation with that foster mom and my most recent conversation with her and the difference is night and day.

Liz: a program that truly has an effect.

Tami: It does.

Deborah: Yes. And we've all known that feeling of just being in survival mode. So for the foster families listening out there I can see where a lot of them would , want to become part of this. We are limited in who we can have in it. How many right now what should they do? And if they can't become a part of this, there are still ways to Utah foster care can help.

Tami: Absolutely. My ask of foster parents would be, let's all be really happy for the foster families who get to be a part of this initial pilot because they are paving the way for this program [00:28:00] to be available to any foster or kinship family in the state of Utah. We are so happy. That they are doing that. The other ask I have is if we do approach you and ask you to be a part of a care team, I can tell you that it's not an easy yes. Always. Sometimes it's an easy yes, but sometimes it's the unknown and will I be judged? And what will that look like? So please consider saying yes. If we ask you, you need to be comfortable though.

I don't want to force yes a soft. Yes. Is okay. Or slow. Yes. For those who can't have a care team yet, what I want you to know is there is help and there's hope. We have an amazing group in retention, which is foster parents support around the state. Please reach out if even if you've reached out before and you feel like there wasn't help or hope yet, please reach back out. They need to know what you need. And we also have. Amazing volunteers statewide our volunteer coordinators [00:29:00] are amazing staff who are looking for ways to support our foster families with things like a night where foster parents can drop their kids off, matching foster families with someone who can bring them meals.

We're all here and so ready to offer all the support and help that we can. We can't fix it all, right? We can't fix it all. But you are not alone in this and there is help and hope available.

Deborah: Liz, any final thoughts?

Liz: Just once again, I've just been amazed at seeing this go from idea to fruition, and I can only imagine how much more good is going to be done in the future with this program.

Deborah: one more thing before we close our podcast, Tami, some quick links where people can get more information.

Tami: Absolutely. If you go to utahfostercare.org, if you want to put that backslash and put in care hyphen communities, you can, or just go to [00:30:00] utahfostercare.org. There's a dropdown menu, care communities. You can go on there, easily submit your information and we will reach out to you and answer your questions.

Deborah: Great. And we will put that link in our notes on our website. So thank you very much. Remember you don't need to know everything to become a foster parent. You just need to be willing to learn. For details on foster parenting and other ways you can get involved, including what we've been talking about, becoming part of our care communities, go to utahfostercare.org.

utahfostercare.org.