

Episode 14: The Tennessee Family Justice Center (FJC) Statewide Initiative with Daina Moran and Heather Brack

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Intro:

Welcome to the NCJA podcast. This podcast series explores promising practices, provides guidance on strategic planning and discusses how the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant Program, or Byrne JAG, contributes to improving justice systems across the country. We hope you enjoy it.

Gillian Caplan:

Thank you so much for joining us today on our NCGA podcast. My name is Gillian Caplan and I am a program manager at NCJA. Today, we are going to be discussing the Tennessee Family Justice Center Statewide Initiative implemented through the Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Programs. Joining me today are Daina Moran, the Deputy Director of Tennessee's Office of Criminal Justice Programs and Heather Brack, NCJA's Grants Accounting Manager, and former Program Director of the Johnson City / Washington County Family Justice Center in Tennessee. Thank you both for being here. I'd love to start by learning a little bit about both of your backgrounds, and then we can dive right into the questions. Daina, would you start us off?

Daina Moran:

Sure. My name is Daina Moran. I am the Deputy Director with the Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Programs. I've been with the SAA's office for 15 years. My formal training is as a licensed marriage and family therapist, and I've worked in the field of domestic violence and sexual assault throughout my career.

Heather Brack:

My name is Heather Brack, and I am currently with NCJA as the Grants Accounting Manager. But prior to this, I was hired by the Johnson City Police Department in order to open our Family Justice Center, the Johnson City / Washington County Family Justice Center.

Gillian Caplan:

Well, again, thank you both so much for being here today with us. To lay the foundation for this conversation, can you describe what Family Justice Centers or FJCs are, and the different components of this program?

Daina Moran:

Absolutely. One of the barriers to receiving help as a domestic violence victim is all the different places you have to go to, to get help. You meet with your advocate at the domestic violence agency. Then you go to the court to file your order of protection. To the police department to check on the status of your case, provide a statement to law enforcement or ask or answer any additional questions that they have.



And then you go to legal aid to get assistance with custody and divorce issues. And then sometimes you have to go to the local family services office to sign up for snap assistance.

Now imagine doing all of this toting two children under the age of five and taking public transportation. The system was not designed to support victims through this process. The Family Justice Center offers a singular location with staff on site from various different departments and agencies, so that it's a one-stop shop to meet the needs of victims.

Each community builds the Family Justice Center it needs with the relevant partners at the table that reflect the needs of the community. The must haves are the police department, prosecution or the district attorney general's office, civil legal services and a domestic violence agency.

But from there, depending on your community resources and the services available, the Family Justice Center may include sexual assault services and space for forensic exams, or child advocacy centers, or other local social services. But at the heart of the FJC, it is so much more than a building for co-location. The Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Program requires communities to start by building a coordinated community response to domestic violence by bringing partner agencies to the table, to talk about their vision for the FJC from day one.

All of these entities already work together. They know one another, they support one another, but they don't regularly meet on a monthly basis for extended periods where they have to build a project like this one. And that's what it takes to build the foundation for a successful Family Justice Center. Showing up, working through the issues, continuing to come to the table for the cause. It takes an investment. It takes a willingness to work through the MOU, the policies and procedures, and a willingness to set your role and your own agenda aside to find a way to come together for the victims.

The outcome is a trauma-informed space that really understands what it takes for a victim to walk through the door seeking help. And it provides support as that victim figures out, what steps they want to take next. The thought that goes into each of these spaces is truly amazing, from the way the space is set up for privacy and safety, to how the space is decorated. There's usually an area for children to play while their parent meets with a navigator or an advocate. They typically have a kitchen so victims and their children can get something to drink and a snack. And the list goes on. There's so much care and concern that goes into the space, and you can literally see victims breathe a sigh of relief as they walk through the door and see that what they're walking into is not just a stale office building, but that a center that was built and planned with them in mind.

Gillian Caplan:

Well, it sounds like it's quite a bit of work to put these together, but it definitely sounds like a worthwhile endeavor. What prompted the Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Programs to decide to fund these programs?

Daina Moran:

Well, at the core of OCJP is the understanding that our funding is not enough to fully support any multifaceted project. And because of that, OCJP approaches our funding from the standpoint that partnerships, collaboration and community buy-in, can often do so much more with less, just based on the synergy of all of those entities coming together and working towards a common goal. It's not uncommon for our projects to require a coordinated community response to an issue. Their applications



often require letters of support, the collaborations described within the application and sometimes MOUs.

So OCJP was on board with the Family Justice Centers because it aligned with how we structure our funding priorities and what we require of many of our funded projects. Additionally, then governor, Bill Haslam had been part of the Knoxville Family Justice Center prior to becoming governor. And he had seen how this model could work in a community, and his administration supported the expansion of Family Justice Centers across Tennessee.

Since expanding the Family Justice Centers, the model has been promoted and recommended in various strategic planning sessions that my office engages in on an annual basis. And in the victim focus groups that we have that really kind of asks our participants what's working and what would you like to see us do more of. When the criminal justice agencies and victims see how this work, they recommend doing more of it. And I think it's because it is so much more than a building. It's a commitment to explore what's not working when it comes to domestic violence, and then rolling up your sleeves and finding a way to make it better and to do it better.

Remember that many of these entities that end up co-locating at the Family Justice Center that will share the same building, they have stood on the opposite sides of the street when it comes to their role and their goal in a domestic violence case. So there has to be a willingness for all the parties to sit down and hash through the tough stuff for the benefit of the victims in the community. And they all see that, the victims, the criminal justice partners, the community as a whole, and the relationships between these entities grow stronger because of it. It's not always easy. It's not always comfortable. And it takes a lot of work and a lot of time, especially in the first couple of years, but what we hear is, its worth.

Gillian Caplan:

It sounds like everyone is centering the victim in the work that they're doing, and centering the victim in the cause. To date, your agency has stood up 11 FJCs across the state of Tennessee. How did Byrne JAG funding help to build the FJCs and how do they become sustainable?

Daina Moran:

Well, when we first looked at expanding the Family Justice Centers in Tennessee, JAG was in many ways the only funding option. The JAG funds are the most flexible and they cover the entire criminal justice system, including the victims and victims services, and there was no match required. The first year is all about building relationships and planning. And at that time, there were not as many victim service fund sources where that was an allowable activity. Plus OCJP felt that this was important to be community-driven, that it requires the community to hold the initial grant, because it's just that important.

So for OCJP, we started with a three-year grant that funds the Family Justice Center coordinator position. And this position naturally morphs into the top leadership role, like the executive director of an FJC. At that point, the position may stay under the governmental entity that originally had the grant, or it might move to a duly established Family Justice Center nonprofit. We require that by the end of the second year, the community opens the doors of their new FJC.

Generally at that point, our office provides a navigator or advocate often through VOCA funding, as well as a domestic violence shelter staff person who could be positioned at the Family Justice Center. We support our Family Justice Center communities by prioritizing our STOP law enforcement and



prosecutor funding within these communities when that funding is available. We also use STOP funding to help the FJCs develop fatality review teams within their communities, through training and technical assistance from a lead Family Justice Center that had already started this process and developed statewide protocols.

But the Family Justice Center's real sustainability is through buy-in at the local level and developing community support. Some communities will take on the overhead costs of the Family Justice Centers, and others split the cost of the Family Justice Center location through all of the entities that are sharing the space. Some Family Justice Centers have been lucky enough to have community benefactors that donate or greatly reduce the cost of space. And many of the Family Justice Centers go on to develop a sister nonprofit agency to assist with fundraising and grant development to continue the support of the Family Justice Center.

Gillian Caplan:

Now that we've talked a little more broadly and statewide about Tennessee Family Justice Centers, I want to think a little bit more locally. What was the process, Heather, from soup to nuts of standing up the Johnson City Family Justice Center?

Heather Brack:

I think it's important to note that the introductory step in forming a Family Justice Center is gaining buy-in to both the concept of what a Family Justice Center is and an acknowledgement that this type of crime exists in our local community. Whether you're in a large city or a rural small community, the stages of planning a Family Justice Center will look similar despite differences in potentially your resources.

Stage one is all about building bridges. It doesn't matter the size of your community. Someone is already there doing this kind of work. And these agencies may have concerns about their services, their funding, what joining a collaborative environment will do for them in erasing the silos that exist between different agencies, you're building bridges. This part also involves educating your community as a whole about why the need for a Family Justice Center exists not just by creating a literal map of what a client in your town has to go through, but also to speak to the community members about the incidents of domestic violence. You'll build awareness, bring in more outside agencies to your planning boards and become that resource that talks about domestic violence, very loudly and openly for your community.

Concurrent to the first step is step two, which is finances. Sustainability planning starts on day one, and is the most critical role that a founding team has to tackle. Once grant funding is gone, how does the Family Justice Center continue to exist? For us, we were incredibly lucky to be in a community that understood the public safety need for a Family Justice Center, so we became government embedded.

Step three is location. So while this seems like an easy process, it has its share of challenges. You are looking for a collaborative working space that can house partner agencies, where you can provide common working areas and potentially individual offices so agencies can maintain their working conditions, all while trying to make sure that you're in a safe location that is tied into public transportation routes. And you also need to know how you're going to be able to pay for it.



Once you find that location, the fun part is planning how to create a trauma-informed space that is immediately safe and welcoming upon entering its doors.

The last step is the one that never ends even when the door is open, and that's designing your service delivery. This includes constant review of best practices, service coordination, adding in partner agencies, creating and delivering training to professionals and your community to strengthen the Family Justice Center's reach. This is why planning a coordinated community response from day one is so incredibly effective. Your working team will be intimately familiar with working together at this point on what your client needs are, what the gaps and services are inside of your community, and how to work together to address the individual client needs and what your community's needs will be long term.

Gillian Caplan:

What were some of the successes and challenges that you experienced when implementing this FJC?

Heather Brack:

I'll start with the challenges. And honestly, sitting here looking back, I can say that while it was challenging at the time everything works out in the end. The primary challenge is personalities and control. As the coordinator to creating this Family Justice Center, you're asking professionals, many of whom have been doing their job in this community for years or decades before even the talk of a Family Justice Center started. And you're now asking them to move their physical location and to be transparent about their processes and their paperwork so that it can be coordinated with others. That's a hard sell for any agency, for any line of business, let alone for a business that has so many protections for anonymity for safety's sake. If for any reason you have two agencies who have a personal reason to not work well together, then the Family Justice Center now gets to stand in the middle of that and build those bridges. You have a lot of agencies who play a role in domestic violence service response, and not all of them look at it from the same lens. Talking the same language and working on the same team allows those differences to be less adversarial.

As for successes, I think every single person who helped, every conversation that was had, everything that we did, led to the success of the Family Justice Center. I have a million success stories, but I can answer with one that kind of touches my heart the most. Our doors were set to open on July 1st for our first day of services, just like the grant asked. We were still a couple weeks shy of that. And on this incredibly warm June day, our air conditioning wasn't working as there was still installation work going on inside of our building.

That afternoon, an individual came into the building. They had been sent there by someone who had heard about the Family Justice Center and they needed our help. So we sat together with a box fan on a chair between us, we talked. They were provided services. And I remember vividly thinking that the weight of being responsible for someone else's pain and their outcome was the heaviest thing I had ever been privileged to carry. And just like that, without any fanfare whatsoever, the Family Justice Center was working the way it was supposed to. Six plus months later, I can't remember how long it was, I received a voicemail from that individual. "Hey, Heather, I don't know if you remember me, but I wanted to call and tell you this." They listed what their outcome was. And they thanked me for being there for them during a time where they had nowhere else to go. I saved that voicemail on my phone for over six years until I left the police department.



We serve hundreds, thousands of clients, but it's the difference that you can make to that one person who needed you that day, that you can change or potentially save their life. That's why the Family Justice Center was created and why it is so successful.

Gillian Caplan:

That is one incredible success. I'd like to go back to the state level and think about some of the successes that may have happened through that initiative. Daina, what successes have you seen throughout the implementation of this statewide initiative?

Daina Moran:

Gosh, there are so many wonderful success stories and amazing impacts that this state initiative has had on our local communities and even on our statewide strategic planning, based on the lesson learned from these communities. The partnerships, the collaborations and the relationships that are built within these communities is by far one of the best success stories. The empathy and understanding that grows from learning the Why behind what each partner does is really something to watch grow and mature.

Remember, the challenging time is not just at the beginning when the FJC is maturing into a functional working group, but as the CCR matures, new problems arise that have to be worked through. And you have the age-old differences between advocates and law enforcement or prosecution between victims rights and public safety needs that have to be addressed and a common ground reached, where each person's role and perspective is respected while they work through the tough issues.

Some of the smallest communities have the biggest transformations through the partnerships and collaborations they build. They bring agencies together in ways that were not tried previously. And the result is, they're saving more lives and increasing accountability of the offenders. What we've really seen is enhanced understanding of the impact on the victim that has led to really enhanced trauma-informed response from all the disciplines when they work with domestic violence victims.

And then that starts to spread over to all victims. When communities see how much more they can do when they're working together rather than separately, they get excited, and they look for other opportunities to improve the system and make changes. Some of the successes that Tennessee has seen have come from how the FJCs choose to build their partner agencies. Some Family Justice Centers incorporate their child advocacy centers right into their building. And they really work through issues related to safe transfer of children with shared custody. They sometimes hold their child protective investigative team meetings at the Family Justice Center.

One outgrowth of this work has been the relationship between my office, the Office of Criminal Justice Programs and the Department of Children's Services. And then also between Child Protective Services and our Domestic Violence Shelter Programs. This has resulted in many of our Family Justice Centers now having what we're calling a DCS, Department of Children's Services, DV liaison that works with CPS to educate the CPS team on the dynamics of domestic violence, and working together to support the victim as they heal and as they support their own children's healing. It's been really amazing. Still, other Family Justice Centers have more fully incorporated their sexual assault response team into their Family Justice Centers. And those centers are providing a host of sexual assault services right there on site, which can be so critical given that sexual assault is often a component of the abuse within these relationships.



Our office has seen sexual assault services and the responses grow in these rural communities that would not have been there today if it had not been for the FJC bringing these groups together, talking through the gaps in services and the gaps in investigations in their communities. These are small rural areas that are finding a way to get forensic exams done in their communities and ensuring that there are services for victims of sexual assault. And it's a direct outgrowth of the FJC movement in Tennessee.

Still, other communities have provided space within the Family Justice Center for elder victims of crime. And they are hosting their VA meetings. VA meetings are the equivalent of a child protective and investigative team meeting, but for the population of vulnerable and older adults. And so what we're finding is that our Family Justice Centers, some of them are choosing to bring in their VAPE partners to be on site. People like Adult Protective Services and agencies that provide services to elder victims of crime. And the increased collaboration between these groups, with our Family Justice Centers and our domestic violence shelters has been amazing to see materialize and to hear the successes happening in those communities.

Another one of Tennessee's successes is the LAP program, that's the Lethality Assessment Protocol program, that's been furthered by the relationships built in the Family Justice Centers. The LAP program is one that anytime a law enforcement officer is out on a domestic violence call, they assess for lethality with the victim. And if the score is high enough, they contact the domestic violence shelter and allow the victim to speak immediately with an advocate. They also offer, regardless of the score, for the victim to talk immediately to an advocate. And that's something that I don't think we would've seen take off the way that it is taken off if people hadn't seen how well law enforcement and shelter programs can work together through our Family Justice Centers.

Some of the larger communities within Tennessee have tackled high risk team investigations and case processing for the cases that they are working in their communities. I also really think that Family Justice Centers have helped to advance trauma-informed approach to all disciplines in the criminal justice system. Our office has supported this through training and technical assistance with other funding, but it's really the relationships and the work that's done through the CCR model in the Family Justice Centers that really helps all the organization move towards a true trauma-informed approach.

I'll give you one last example. One of the most heartwarming success stories is how the smaller communities in rural parts of Tennessee have come together to provide the space for the Family Justice Center. These communities have more limited budgets, they have more limited community resources. But when the community hears what they're trying to do, what they want to provide for victims, then you have individuals and private companies who have been touched by domestic violence in their own childhoods or their mother or family member were murdered due to a domestic violence situation, and they want to be a part of the Family Justice Center. They want to help to build a space where others can have a different outcome. People who want to see a different outcome for victims, they bring their time and their talent to the table to in some cases, literally build a space for that different outcome to happen. So sometimes it's their carpentry skills or their HVAC work or other skills that they can donate to the Family Justice Center to help build it in their community. And the very best part is that these people, because their heart is in it, they keep showing up. The grand openings of these Family Justice Centers share these stories, and there is not a dry eye in the room.

Gillian Caplan:



That is a lot of success. And with every success, there's obviously going to be obstacles and challenges as well. So if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit about what some of the obstacles and challenges you have encountered when standing up this program statewide have been, as well as some of the obstacles and challenges when ensuring each site is sustainable after three years of initial funding.

Daina Moran:

It's similar to the challenges faced by other priorities and programs and projects that we as SAA fund, it's time and money. There's never enough of either. One thing that was key to expanding our Family Justice Centers across Tennessee was to have someone within our office, the SAA office that served as the Family Justice Center coordinator for all of Tennessee. And that position really needs to be there to the extent possible so that it can be available to the sites to help them work through their local issues. This is why we've done about three to four sites every three years, because that statewide Family Justice Center coordinator is a critical position. And it's so important to support the communities as they go through the process of figuring out how their community is going to do a Family Justice Center.

In the earliest days of this initiative at the local level, at the community level, there will be a cheerleader. Sometimes it's the newly hired Family Justice Center coordinator in that community. Sometimes it's the police chief or a mayor, but it's someone who keeps everyone coming to the meetings, keeps everyone focused on the goal of the project. And when there is turnover in that position, that can be a challenge and a huge struggle.

Turnovers in any organization can create a bump. And that's true for Family Justice Centers at any point, whether it's the first year or year 10. And it's really important that the Family Justice Center thinks about turnover in their partnership organizations, in their leadership and government leadership roles and builds a plan for training and integration of new members or newly elected officials into the Family Justice Center, so that they are brought up to speed from day one. They learn what the Family Justice Center is, they learn what's come before in the building of the Family Justice Center, and they learn about what their role is in the Family Justice Center.

You know, that is succession planning. But when the Family Justice Center is in its forming stage, when it's in its early process and there's turnover, it is really tough on the project. It may flounder for a bit until someone else is hired or until that new cheerleader or new champion fills the gap. And so they'll struggle a little bit. This is especially true if the location has not developed its MOUs with its partner agencies yet, and especially if it's prior to the operating procedures, having them work through.

Government, in and of itself, can always be a challenge. So working with county governments to get new positions into their budgets, even when they know this is coming multiple years down the road and it's a part of the initial grant, it can be a challenge. It's something that the local government has to keep its eye on. And the site has to keep regular communication with the leadership of that local government to make sure that, that position is created in a timely manner and that it remains a priority to the community.

As we all know, COVID has presented its own set of challenges. As I said earlier, one of the absolute keys to the success of Family Justice Centers is showing up in person and working through issues each month. So just as the most recent Family Justice Centers started to ramp up their planning, COVID hit. In many ways I think as the SAA, that if we had planned an FJC solicitation for the spring of 2020, we would've had to delay those projects altogether, or extend the planning period. Lucky for us,



that most recent round of Family Justice Centers, did have some time to start to build those relationships. And in those first few months, they were able to connect with one another, to have meetings before it all turned virtual.

And that time together face to face was really important to building the trust between not just the individuals, but also the entities themselves, law enforcement and prosecution and the victim service provider. And that trust is essential to working through all the tougher issues.

There were other challenges related to COVID. And that was true for our new Family Justice Center and our more seasoned Family Justice Centers. COVID created issues for meeting with victims in person at the Family Justice Center. But as with all our victim service agencies, they figured out how to keep doing business during COVID. They figured out how to continue to meet with victims in safe ways. They found ways to help victims stay safe during COVID, and each community figured that out in a little bit different way.

One community in particular found a way to notarize orders of protection in the parking lot. That's something that would've been unheard of five years ago. Nobody would've even dared bring it up, let alone try it. But here as a result of the pandemic, they found ways to get the work done and keep victims safe. And at the basis of a Family Justice Center, problem solving and working with your multidisciplinary team to find a way to get to yes, and to help the victim is really at its core. And that's what's amazing about these programs.

Gillian Caplan:

Thank you, Daina. And a lot of our states are really thinking about ways of using Byrne JAG dollars differently than they have in the past. So for state administering agencies interested in using Byrne JAG dollars to fund these FJCs, what are some major takeaways they should know as they embark on this process?

Daina Moran:

Well, as I said a little bit earlier, the first thing is to have someone in your office, or if not an internal staff person, then perhaps a TA provider, who can assist the communities throughout the planning process. That's really key to have that support and that person that they can turn to when they have questions and need help. Our office has developed a toolkit to use with these communities, but it really helps to have someone who can really walk through it with them and support them when they get stuck. We were very, very lucky, we found an ideal candidate in Jessica Cleveland. She had worked for a local Family Justice Center and then worked outside the state as a TA provider to other Family Justice Centers, and then she moved into her role within our office.

And I do recognize that not every SAA will have that opportunity. And when you don't, then it's finding the right candidate that has the political savvy required in the position with strong communication skills and the ability to motivate and support the local coordinators as they do the same with their individual teams. As I said, each community's path will be different. Those who start at the table in the first months of the FJC creation might not be those who sign the MOU or become the regular representative as it progresses. It's important not to be too prescriptive about how it has to look, you have to trust the process. And you can't rescue them, or it becomes the state's Family Justice Center and not the community's Family Justice Center.



Remember, these entities know each other and they work together, but they don't often come together and talk about their roles and what they do day in and day out. They don't often come together and problem solve a situation that they are both a part of. The coordinator at the local level will have to keep the partners invested in the process, reach out to those that become disengaged and bring them back to the table. That's when they are the cheerleaders and the taskmasters and the champions of the cause. And when they get stuck, they're going to need someone in your office at the SAA level or a TA provider to go to, to support them so that they can better support their community partners.

Everyone likes the idea of co-location, and that gets them excited in the building. Figuring out where it should be, what it needs to have, how it's going to be set up, a lot of what Heather spoke about earlier, all of that is important, but cannot come before the true grit of working through key issues of confidentiality and shared space, processes of what can and will be shared, when and how it will be shared, and how staff from each entity will interact with victims.

Gillian Caplan:

Well, with that said, I want to thank you both so much for joining us today.

Outro:

Thanks again to Daina Moran and Heather Brack for speaking with us about their experiences with Family Justice Centers. To learn more about Family Justice Centers in Tennessee and across the nation, visit the Family Justice Center Alliance, at familyjusticecenter.org. To hear this episode and all episodes of the NCJA podcast, visit us at ncja.org. Thank you.