

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Wellness with Dr. Aimée Neri Gueye

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insights from the New York courts. I'm John Caher.

For today's Diversity Dialogue segment, we're going to commemorate National Wellness Month, albeit just a little bit late, with a program that will largely focus on legal, judicial, and court workforce practice. Our guest is Dr. Aimée Neri Gueye of the Office for Justice Initiatives, Child Welfare and Family Justice Division.

Dr. Neri Gueye serves as a Child Welfare Court Improvement Project Coordinator for the Eighth Judicial District, Statewide Project Manager for integrating trauma-informed practices in Family Courts and Indian Child Welfare Act practices.

She has over 20 years of experience providing training, technical assistance and program coordination with government systems, not-for-profit and private organizations as well as working in private practice.

A trained mediator and a restorative practices circle keeper, Dr. Neri Gueye holds certificates in trauma counseling, mindfulness and workplace wellness. She is a co-developer for the trauma-informed model in family court named "Taking the Hurt Out of Trauma" and one of the supervising editors for "An Attorney's Guide to Interviewing Their Child Clients, Integrating Trauma-Informed and Solution-Focused Strategies."

Dr. Neri Gueye is an adjunct faculty member at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work Program and a recent graduate of the Doctor of Social Welfare program. Her research focused on implementation science of restorative practices with court-based workforce. Her areas of interest include child welfare, restorative practices, trauma-informed care and organizational wellness.

Aimée, welcome to the program. We have a lot to unpack today, so why don't we start by defining our terms. What is the Child Welfare Court Improvement Project, or CWCIP?

Aimée Neri Gueye: Sure. Thank you for having me today, John.

So, CWCIP is a federally funded program that exists across the country in most states. It's a court-led initiative that focuses on improving safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for children and families where

children are in out-of-home placements. And we do that by providing technical assistance, training and data analysis with multidisciplinary stakeholder collaboratives.

John Caher: And what is trauma-informed care and how does that fit into the picture?

Aimée Neri Gueye: Trauma-informed care is an evidence-based approach to help people working in systems do business with each other. It's a universal response to human interactions, really. And research has been really clear that when we, in the systems, operate from five principles—safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment—it will increase the likelihood of productive and positive outcomes for families that we serve. The Court Improvement Project is all about safety and well-being for children and families. So to me, it's very necessary to practice in a trauma-informed way if we really are in the business of promoting safety, permanency, and well-being.

John Caher: So it sounds like everyone has some level of trauma in their life and I think what you're saying maybe is that until you understand that trauma and maybe until *they* understand that trauma, you're not going to get very far. Is that right?

Aimée Neri Gueye: Absolutely. When we think about trauma-informed care, it's about taking universal practices. We don't really ever know anyone's whole story and trauma is pretty pervasive, so if we act in this way, we're never going to make it worse.

John Caher: “We'll never make it worse.” That's a great way of looking at it. Now, in the courts, we are in a business of dealing with trauma in multiple, multiple ways every single day. How can we incorporate that principle into what we do in the judicial system?

Aimée Neri Gueye: I would say that the court actually has a lot of things in place that already are trauma-informed because we're really talking about civility and humanity. Things like our alternate dispute and resolution processes like mediation and conferencing models, even our Equal Justice in the Courts initiatives and the Administrative Rules of the court, Rule 50.1, part 100, they talk about that obligation for judicial and non-judicial workforce to uphold integrity of the court and promote public trust and confidence.

So it's about how we do business with each other first because when we shift to making those interactions with each other, whether that's within the workforce or that's with our various attorneys and community agencies and stakeholders, to really promoting those five principles,

we're going to start to see better outcomes for the court users in the community we serve.

John Caher: That seems very consistent with the message that we've been hearing from the top, the very top, from the Chief Judge. I think it was the State of the Judiciary when the Chief Judge spoke of courts not as merely deciders of cases, but solvers of problems.

Aimée Neri Gueye: Absolutely. And I think we know that when people have some agency in the solutions to their problems, those solutions stick. Honestly, the more we can find opportunities to empower the people who are coming to us seeking relief to be the ones creating the solutions that we can then enforce or support, the more likely it is that they're not going to be returning to us.

John Caher: What do you mean by "agency in the solutions?"

Aimée Neri Gueye: I do best when I'm the one who came up with the solution. When I'm the one who is the creator of the idea, I'm more bought into it and while people obviously do come to the court seeking relief, we are strangers to their lives, so however we can, empower them to be part of that process. Trials have to happen, right? They certainly do. Whatever we can do to really have people coming into the court system feeling like they're a part of the process, it's going to help them have ownership over whatever the resolutions are.

John Caher: That seems to be the guiding principle behind our whole mediation effort and I think all the experts and all the evidence and all the research would show that mediation is effective for the simple reason that the parties work out a solution so there's not a winner and a loser, as there is in a trial.

Aimée Neri Gueye: Correct. Agreed.

John Caher: Now, I know you managed the 52 Ways project. What is it?

Aimée Neri Gueye: So the 52 Ways for 52 Weeks of Wellness Project actually launched in 2020 in Erie County Family Court as a pilot. It's a weekly email that anyone in the court system can sign up to receive. That address for signing up is 52ways@nycourts.gov. Anyone who participates is going to receive a weekly email that includes a short themed message about wellness and self-care. There will be a quote, some practice tips, and also, some further reading for anyone who wants to dig in a little bit deeper. We're actually in the fifth year of the project and it currently reaches over

500 employees. It even reaches to employees outside of the court system, including stakeholder groups like practicing attorneys and bar associations, the Office for Children and Family Services, Tribal Nation Representatives, and Department of Corrections and Community Services.

John Caher: I know you work with the tribal nations. That must be a particular specialty with very specific and unique issues and solutions. Is that correct?

Aimée Neri Gueye: Truthfully, it's always about knowing and understanding that anyone that you're working with, any nation, any group of people, any community that you're working with all have their own identities and that that's not even a monolith. So it's really about how we're always staying very open to learning from others instead of making presumptions about what we think we know.

John Caher: That's a good way to put it. Now, I know you work in a division of the Office for Justice Initiatives. OJI, as we call it, is responsible for leading the equal justice work in the courts. So how does wellness and trauma-informed care support equal justice efforts? What does it have to do with equal justice?

Aimée Neri Gueye: I actually love this intersection. Equal justice is all about ensuring that we're not creating more harm by ensuring that there is equity in promoting anti-oppression and anti-racism in the processes of the court system. You can't be trauma-informed unless you're also practicing with anti-oppression and anti-racism because oppression and racism are traumatic.

Please let me be clear, it doesn't mean that we get everything right all the time. It doesn't mean that the system is perfect, that's an impossibility. I think it does mean that we keep showing up, open to learning, willing to believe others' experiences, and then working to understand the complex and really inconvenient truths so we can do the hard work that will affect change.

John Caher: How can the courts, especially our Family Courts, but I also want to delve into our other courts, embrace these concepts and make them real and make them a part of their practice?

Aimée Neri Gueye: The simple answer and the hardest work is that you first do that internal work to acknowledge and tend to your own stress and trauma first. You work on widening your tolerance for very uncomfortable conversations

and then learn how to believe and validate each other. And I really do mean that from stakeholder to stakeholder as well as between the court and court users and ,of course, then work collaboratively with OJI and CIP to develop and implement practices and policies for both the workforce and in court buildings to promote equitable and trauma-informed culture.

John Caher: Are you finding the judges receptive to that?

Aimée Neri Gueye: I actually am. I believe the jurists get onto that bench every day wanting to do the very best they can in their role. And the reality is that there's an intersection between human behavior and the law because the law is operationalized by people and so it impacts people's lives. And so I think any guide, any roadmap, any information that they can have accessible to them to help inform their decisions and the way that they do business is something that they find meaningful.

John Caher: Thank you. Let's take a bit of a step back and shift the focus not only to your work, but to you. How did you develop an interest in all of this and why?

Aimée Neri Gueye: So I fell in love first with that intersection between social work and the law during my first internship 20 years ago in my master's program. I have to give that gratitude to retired Judge Janice Rosa. What I found very quickly as I moved into positions in the court system and at every turn in my career, there seemed to be another opportunity to really experience how much the law and social work, which social work is the science of human behavior and community dynamics. It's not a school of only therapy. Law and social work really depend on each other, as I just said, in order to really have the greatest potential for service.

So to me, I've had this wonderful opportunity to keep thinking about how we don't do more harm, how we don't make it worse, and how we do have the right tools to make it better and learn by informing each other.

John Caher: It sounds like a Hippocratic Oath approach to jurisprudence.

Aimée Neri Gueye: I would agree.

John Caher: Now, the courts, for better or worse, have a sometimes literally captive audience, and I have heard some of the top judges say, "What an opportunity when we have these people before us, we can address all kinds of things." Do you agree with that?

Aimée Neri Gueye: I do agree that it is an opportunity to address so many things, so long as it is what the individuals are driven to address. We want to always have that balance of addressing what we must and providing whatever support they're looking for in seeking relief and not really ever going beyond that.

John Caher: I see. And not trying to fit square pegs in round holes, I suppose?

Aimée Neri Gueye: Yeah, absolutely. And also, of course, I am not a judge, so I certainly don't ever presume to know what is the best way for a judge to operate.

John Caher: What do you wish that judges better understood about this whole social science of trauma and wellness?

Aimée Neri Gueye: I think that for me, the most important message is knowing and understanding that not any one of us is separate and apart from it. That we really all are still interconnected, that people are still people at the end of the day, including every single one of us in the court system within our role, and that our brain and our body are connected. They are not separate. So anything that our brain experiences, so does our body and vice versa, and so we have to account for all of that at the same time.

John Caher: That's a nice reminder not only for judges and not only for people in court, but for all of us. Thank you, Aimée. Thank you for your time and thank you for your insight and thank you for your work.

Aimée Neri Gueye: Thank you so much for having me, John.