

EP06 P1: KAREN TURNER

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

00:00:01 **Katie Jensen**

QCC is proud to showcase the dedication of those who make decisions for the greater good and strive to leave the world a better place for all Canadians.

00:00:10 **Katie Jensen**

All personal views expressed by guests and our host are their own.

00:00:14 **Katie Jensen**

QCC will continue to recognize those in public service who offer a kaleidoscope of perspectives and operating good faith to build trust with QCC members and all public citizens.

00:00:31 **Karen Turner**

Poverty just really means that you don't have those conveniences to go to appointments or shopping, and everything takes time or money.

00:00:43 **Katie Jensen**

Hi, I'm Katie Jensen and this is the Path of Public service from Quarter Century Club, celebrating people who have spent their lives working in Ontario's public sector.

00:00:55 **Karen Turner**

Well this is QCC, so I'm not a spring chicken.

00:00:59 **Karen Turner**

Hi, my name is Karen Turner. I work with the Ministry of Children Community and Social Services. I'm a Community Programs Manager.

00:01:09 **Katie Jensen**

Karen Turner has spent her career in the public sector, supporting some of Ontario's most vulnerable populations.

00:01:14 **Karen Turner**

They've always said to people that you want to learn skills of empathy, work in corrections. Like get that under your belt.

00:01:21 **Katie Jensen**

She came to work in public service after working with women who were unhoused.

00:01:26 **Karen Turner**

For the longest time, I would see women on the street, and sometimes they didn't always know that I had left and so they would literally come up to me and they'd say. "Karen! I got a house!"

00:01:36 **Katie Jensen**

Today on Path of Public Service. Karen joins us to talk about how music enriches her life, both in her work and outside of it.

00:01:46 **Karen Turner**

Whenever you didn't see me, I was somewhere on a piano.

00:01:50 **Katie Jensen**

What she's learned about managing a team.

00:01:53 **Karen Turner**

We did this chip social the other day where everybody had to bring in a bag of chips and we all judged them!

00:01:59 **Katie Jensen**

And how she turns lemons into lemonade. Literally.

00:02:02 **Karen Turner**

Gosh, I think about 30 years ago we kind of started this business where we operate this booth where we make lemonade, it is shocking to me how many ex-clients come by.

00:02:15 **Katie Jensen**

I started by asking what a Community Programs Manager actually does.

00:02:20 **Karen Turner**

The obvious answer is that we manage programs. But what that means is we have oversight for various programs that the ministry funds. I work in the children's part of the ministry, so we fund several programs for children, youth and their families. My portfolio specifically is Child Welfare. So we provide funding to Children's Aid

Societies. I'm in Toronto, so there's four Children's Aid Societies in Toronto.

00:02:51 **Karen Turner**

I'm also responsible for licensing and compliance. Those are folks that go out to out of care homes, so any kinds of group homes, foster homes, places where children may live if they're not in their family of origin home, and also the Black Youth Action Plan.

00:03:11 **Karen Turner**

And so those are community agencies that are part of our program that the ministry funds that was developed specifically to provide supports to children and youth in black communities throughout Toronto to increase chances for success. My staff, we're kind of the conduit between the public and the government. We work with organizations to negotiate their funding and we're really there to support organizations. We want to see success. So that's what we do in a nutshell.

00:03:47 **Karen Turner**

It's really hard to explain, because I feel like my day changes all the time, and that's the definition I'm giving you today.

00:03:54 **Karen Turner**

But if you ask me tomorrow, I'd probably tell you something slightly different.

00:03:58 **Katie Jensen**

Well, I would love to actually dive into what your day looks like.

00:04:01 **Karen Turner**

Today, folks that license children's home are part of my portfolio, so a licensing

manager reports to me. And so today she and I met, we meet every week like clockwork. And so we met and talked about just issues that she's seeing on the ground.

00:04:20 **Karen Turner**

What she's seeing with different organizations, what some of their challenges are, you know. And to be frank, also what are some concerns.

Part of our job is to manage serious occurrences. And so, serious occurrences, they are kind of exactly what the words are, but it could be anything from a client of an organization is hurt and has to go to the hospital, but it could be something like there's a flood. Very worst case scenario obviously is a death, so that's a conversation that I often have with the licensing manager around what kinds of serious occurrences are you seeing at organizations? Is there any supports that we can put in place at organizations?

00:05:04 **Karen Turner**

What are these organizations' plan to manage some of these serious occurrences? Because obviously there's ones that you can't do anything about, you know, such as a flood. But even with a flood we would still be asking the organization questions like so where are the clients? What kinds of supports are in place for the clients? Are they able to stay there? And if not, where sometimes clients might need to go from one organization to another or might need to return home temporarily or maybe in a hotel.

00:05:35 **Karen Turner**

And in those situations, we want to ensure that the children are safe, that there is appropriate staffing, that they're still getting all of the services and the needs that they would have gotten if they were in the house.

00:05:48 **Katie Jensen**

I'm curious if you could drill down into some of the day-to-day challenges that you see happening within. We'll start with the Children's Aid Society in Ontario. And I guess specifically in Toronto, what are you seeing in terms of clients in terms of out of home care in terms of the people who are helping manage the programs with you?

00:06:11 **Karen Turner**

One of the largest challenges I would say is just that intersection between child welfare and special needs.

00:06:20 **Karen Turner**

That's something that fascinated me when I kind of came into this work, because that's not something that you really think about when you think about child's welfare. I think people think about child welfare is about apprehending children and separating families. One thing that does happen in child welfare is there are times when children might be in the care of the Society.

00:06:40 **Karen Turner**

Or sometimes children come into care or are provided service by the Society where parents are really stressed or just aren't able to care for their children for a myriad of reasons. Children sometimes

have some really challenging diagnosis, challenging behaviors. And sometimes parents, you know, that is where they reach out to is to their Children's Aid Societies to support them.

00:07:11 **Katie Jensen**

Yeah, I guess a lot of people wouldn't think that it can be an optional thing to engage these services.

00:07:15 **Karen Turner**

Absolutely. One thing that happens is when the families reach out to support the Children's Aid, they're not going to turn any child away.

00:07:23 **Karen Turner**

And so sometimes these children need additional support. They might have a diagnosis, for example, of autism or mental health challenges, or a developmental disability, and they require services from another organization. So the challenge for children's aid societies at times is kind of dealing with the same things that everybody else deals with is waiting lists. Like how do you get children into service, and who's caring for them while they're on those waiting lists?

00:07:55 **Karen Turner**

There is also a, it's called [Between] a Rock and a Hard Place, which I believe was a Ombudsman's report from many years ago, and the result of that is that children should not have to be put into care for parents to access supports for them. So when we're in a situation that the Children's Aid Society has brought a child into care because that's the only way that they can get support, then that

that is actually really contravening the report. So that's something that we're always trying not to do. There's times that the Ombudsman does get involved and they do kind of question us question different organizations involved around why is this happening. Why is this child remaining in children's aid care? What this child needs is supports from another organization.

00:08:48 **Karen Turner**

It's challenging to get those supports and for children to be given that warm transfer into special needs services. The issue isn't about the money, but money is a part of the issue absolutely, because everything costs money.

So when those children are with the Children's Aid Society it's like they're paying for children to be in services where there's no protection concerns. Those parents, they haven't done anything wrong. They are able to protect their children, their children are safe. And so really those children should be able to move into special needs when the Children's Aid steps back, but the Children's Aid isn't able to step back if they have to be on waiting lists.

So there are respite services just for, you know, families that need the break.

00:09:35 **Karen Turner**

There's overnight respite programs. There's day respite programs so that parents can go out and do things and there's somebody that comes into the home. And it's just challenging being a caregiver 24/7, people need to sleep. Parents need to sleep. There's some children that have to have supports like

one-on-ones. But there's children that need two-to-ones, three-to-ones that have some really challenging behaviors where multiple supports are needed.

00:10:06 **Katie Jensen**

To better understand how Karen approaches her work with children than families, we went back to the beginning, to her childhood growing up in Hamilton.

00:10:15 **Karen Turner**

We're Jamaican, so my dad came years before us. So when we came, I was a baby, my sister was 9. And when my dad was in a job, he's a steel worker and he was often out and about and in different cities, sometimes different countries. And so my mother, though she was not a single mother in some ways, was raising us by herself when my father was out working, you know? And then my brother came along, and so it was the three of us kids with my mom at home while my dad's in the steel mills. And well, this is QCC, so I'm not a spring chicken.

00:10:52 **Karen Turner**

So I remember like in the 70s, my mother did drive, which was very unusual, that many of my friends, their mothers did not drive. But we only had the one car. So if my father was out working, he had the car. And those were the days too that people would share taxis. And I remember we would go grocery shopping, and so many of the women would be there in curlers because then they would go home and take out their curlers for their husbands and get ready for dinner.

00:11:19 **Karen Turner**

And so we would go to the grocery store and would be my mom, and you know all the other women in curlers with their kids, and we would all shop and then we would share taxis with strangers and come home.

00:11:30 **Katie Jensen**

So I lived in Hamilton for five years, oh, I did not have a car for four of those years. Yes, and it is a wide spread out city. The transit system is good, but you can't take all the things that you need to take on a bus easily. I think maybe a lot of people don't understand the time tax when you're poor, of like when you don't have a lot of money, what you have to pay for is your time. Everything takes longer. You can't take shortcuts. There's no convenience.

00:11:59 **Karen Turner**

Absolutely. Everything costs money. I mean, my parents are far from poor, so I don't want to, you know, misrepresent their situation. But definitely I do see it, especially now, you know, dealing with kind of older folks that don't have transportation because they don't drive.

00:12:16 **Karen Turner**

Which is a different but similar situation to folks living in poverty that might not have transportation or access to transportation and to take taxis is not something that's doable. Poverty just really means that you don't have those conveniences to go to you know, appointments or shopping. And everything takes time, or money.

00:12:38 **Katie Jensen**

I'm even thinking about when someone is, let's say, getting a diagnosis because they're in respite, right? The diagnosis process requires a lot of patience and a lot of time. And the emotional support that kids need requires a lot of time.

00:12:54 **Karen Turner**

And the other challenging piece of that too is when you're waiting on a waiting list, an organization might say, you know, oh we've got a short waiting list, it's only two months. You know? Two months when you're in a very challenging situation, two months is an eternity.

00:13:08 **Katie Jensen**

So at the time we're recording this, we're in the summer of 2023. We're currently in a cost of living crisis in Toronto, in Ontario and nationally. How has that affected the work that you've done?

00:13:19 **Karen Turner**

As we know, Toronto is very, very expensive. We don't have as many group homes as some of the other regions. So many of the children in care of our societies live outside of Toronto. And so that's not ideal when children have their parents involved, that their parents are living very far away from their children.

00:13:40 **Karen Turner**

That's not ideal. Sometimes just finding appropriate placements for children is challenging. It's not about just finding a placement anywhere, it's about finding the right placement for children. I think

also, just with the cost of living crisis, I mean this is a crisis for parents.

00:14:00 **Karen Turner**

So we're seeing families that are stressed out. All of those things kind of contribute to family breakdown.

00:14:08 **Karen Turner**

That one situation that happens is that sometimes, when the children first became in contact with the Children's Aid Societies, when the families were stressed, but when the stress is also about the situation, managing or dealing with their children's behaviors, plus poverty, plus housing, plus all of those stresses, when you're on a waiting list to get services and the rest of your life is in crisis, sometimes something that was small like turns into a crisis. So we're absolutely seeing those kinds of stresses. And we're absolutely seeing that in the work, again, contributes to family breakdown.

00:14:46 **Katie Jensen**

I'm really curious, as a manager how you're speaking to your team to make sure that you're always checking in to make sure that you don't have empathy burnout?

00:14:55 **Karen Turner**

Oh, that is so hard. It's so hard.

00:14:59 **Karen Turner**

That is so hard. I mean, I'm pretty casual, I'm pretty open, I think, you know, if you were to talk to my staff, they'd say, oh, you know, that Karen, she's always kind of the life of the party! And that is true a lot.

00:15:11 **Katie Jensen**

It's because you're an auntie. You've got big auntie energy.

00:15:13 **Karen Turner**

It's true! I absolutely do.

00:15:17 **Karen Turner**

But I do kind of remind my staff at times, you know, that we're not the caseworker. We are not the caregiver.

00:15:24 **Karen Turner**

So things can be very, very stressful, but it's not our stress in the same way. However, it is still stressful and my team, especially my Child Welfare team, we meet every single week. We have two-hour meeting scheduled, and every single week it's pushed to like 2 1/2 hours, 3 hours.

00:15:45 **Karen Turner**

We talk about the situations. We talk about how we feel about them. We talk about what can we do to make things better. What are the challenges that these organizations, can we get some of them together, maybe there's a training issue. We talk about the kind of cases that have come across our desk, or parents that we've talked to. And we talk about how do we take care of ourselves. We talk about work-life balance.

00:16:11 **Karen Turner**

I try to keep things, you know, light at times on the team, and we'll go out for lunch or we'll just do like, you know. My team is really quirky so we did things like we did this chip social the other day, where everybody had to bring in a bag

of chips and we all we judge them and who had the best chips.

00:16:27 **Katie Jensen**

What did you bring?

00:16:30 **Karen Turner**

I love British snacks! Love them. So I think I have brought some kind of roast chicken Guinness chips something like that.

00:16:40 **Katie Jensen**

Everyone won.

00:16:41 **Karen Turner**

Everybody won! Then I remember, that night I could not eat dinner and it was like there was a hole in my stomach from all the spicy chips.

00:16:50 **Katie Jensen**

Amazing, I love that.

00:16:51 **Katie Jensen**

I mean, that's great that you have work-life balance. But as you're a caregiver for your parents, how do you practice what you preach, because you are caring for everyone all the time?

00:17:01 **Karen Turner**

I mean, my parents, they're in their late 80s and you know, they're doing really well. They live in Hamilton and I'm in Toronto, so which is not too far. So I'm there two days a week. And so one thing that I do, and I am blessed that I have a great boss who allowed me to do this, every Monday I work out of my parents' house in the morning and then in the afternoons I take the afternoons off.

00:17:21 **Katie Jensen**

Amazing. That's great flexibility.

00:17:23 **Karen Turner**

Oh my gosh it is so amazing for both me and my parents because what was happening before, and so I'd be trying to work there and then all day my parents would come in and say, oh, can you just drop me off at the doctor's, or can you take me shopping and just like, oh, my goodness, I have a job! I'm constantly saying, you know I have a job right?

00:17:42 **Katie Jensen**

Was it like the instant they retired, they completely forgot what it was like to have a 9-to-5?

00:17:46 **Karen Turner**

Yes! Yes, absolutely!

00:17:51 **Karen Turner**

Yeah, so this is great too. I mean just that I kind of get that break where I could just work for you know, like 4 hours in the morning and then I don't think about work anymore. And then in the afternoon, my time is just for them, and they can schedule all of their doctor's appointments, we go shopping, go for coffee. So that's been a big help for me, for sure.

00:18:12 **Katie Jensen**

We should probably talk about your side thing that you do, which is that you're a musician.

00:18:17 **Karen Turner**

I am!

00:18:18 **Katie Jensen**

And you've been a musician, your whole life.

00:18:19 **Karen Turner**

I have been. Yes, I almost don't remember not being a musician.

00:18:26 **Karen Turner**

My father comes from a large family and I think there's about thirteen siblings. When many of them sing, so I felt like I always grew up around music. I think my parents even brought me a toy piano that I played when I was like about four or five. And I remember at church we grew up in the Baptist Church in Hamilton and I would bring my toy piano and I would play it there.

00:18:46 **Katie Jensen**

Oh my gosh.

00:18:47 **Karen Turner**

Right? And then even when I got older, I would play the real piano. And it's like whenever you didn't see me, I was somewhere on a piano.

00:18:54 **Karen Turner**

Being in the church, that's where I did a lot of piano playing, piano and organ. And then my father again, who was kind of quite musical and came from like a tradition in Jamaica where it's really important for folks, like children especially, to remember a lot of things, to have memory verses to remember passages or there were things that they called gems which were little kind of proverbs and things that they always knew. And so my father was always really into that. And he would sometimes run musical programs at church. You

know, we'd have, like, the Easter cantata and the Christmas programs, and he would do these little spring programs and all kinds of things. And so I would often be the musician, I would often play for those.

00:19:42 Karen Turner

And then the other thing that happened, which really shaped much of my musical career, was we also are part of a Caribbean organization in Hamilton, the Afro Canadian Caribbean Association, which which is called ACCA.

00:19:56 Karen Turner

And they had a theater group called the Akamba Theatre Workshop.

00:20:02 Karen Turner

And I started playing piano for them. And then where it's also taken me.

00:20:09 Karen Turner

I've kind of married it at times with my social services work and I used to do some therapeutic workshops, working with women. I partnered with a detox center for women and they had a partnership I think with the Toronto Western Hospital. And so I would teach them Caribbean songs.

00:20:28 Karen Turner

That was just so phenomenal, especially for me at times.

00:20:33 Karen Turner

Like I'm often challenged by kind of like that 18 to 25 year olds and group where you know just kind of look at you like you're old and nothing you say makes any kind of sense. And to work

sometimes with that age group, you know, and it's a detox center, so people don't always want to be there. And then to see folks that kind of come in and they're the tough girl.

00:20:54 Karen Turner

An hour later, we're singing medleys and going around. To see people come alive, it's just been awesome. And then in more past recent years I've been playing at Kensington Hospice and that has probably been the most rewarding thing in my life to do.

00:21:12 Karen Turner

Or one of the most rewarding for sure. And that one I just go in and play songs for about an hour or so, hour, hour and a half. And the interesting thing with the hospice is you never know who's going to be there.

00:21:27 Karen Turner

Because people are there for end of life, and they're often end of life, you know, so if you go every couple of weeks you might see completely different people.

00:21:37 Karen Turner

Where the piano is there, it's in kind of the the great room, which is the living room and dining room. And so you don't know when you get there. Will it be patients in the room? Will it be their families? You don't know what age people are going to be, like, and so you need to be kind of adaptable but at the same time remember there is the music therapist who works with them. She also kind of gave us some tips.

00:22:02 Karen Turner

And she actually really doesn't want the volunteer musicians to be playing a lot of songs that have words or very like common songs that the words are recognizable, because they can really bring out emotions in folks. And you need to be able to handle them when that comes about. And sometimes it'll be the most innocuous kind of song, where I'm kind of surprised. I remember one time I was there, and I

00:22:27 **Karen Turner**

I try to bring my culture into my music when I'm there. And so I was playing, I think a Bob Marley song, I think I was playing like One Love for some... no, it was Redemption Song 'cause I start every set with Redemption Song. Mm-hmm. Then this woman just kind of came up to me and just started crying and said like, "Ohh I went on my honeymoon to Jamaica. It reminds me of my honeymoon. I was so sad. And now my partner is not well and you know, and this is just bringing me back." And so it's just you, you never know. And then the other thing that's interesting with the hospice too is sometimes nobody is there because they're all in their rooms, but they can hear.

00:23:05 **Katie Jensen**

Oh yeah, piano's loud too.

00:23:07 **Karen Turner**

Right, exactly. And so to play for an audience of people that you actually don't know who's there, and so you're just guessing. And then for me, sometimes I just go by just the strangest cues, just to kind of know how it's going

over. Like, if, you know, one of the family members kind of comes out to make something in the kitchen, and I'm just kind of seeing [them] humming along, what's going on and you know, and sometimes they'll say that like, oh, like, you know, my mom asked for, you know, do you know this song, you know? And then sometimes it's amazing, like, sometimes folks that come out, they wanna sing and they're singing along with you and they're reminiscing. It's a beautiful thing. I love that work.

00:23:46 **Katie Jensen**

That was the end of Part 1. Thanks for listening. We hope you tune in for Part 2.