

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE ILLINOIS CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM TURNAROUND

Comments by Jess McDonald, former director of the
Illinois Department of Children and Family Services; 1994-2003

Out of control child welfare systems hurt children and families, harm staff, generate poor outcomes and have excessive costs. Illinois in the early 1990's was a classic example of such a system. The lessons we can take away from the decade of change in the Illinois child welfare system may well help other states avoid similar tragedies and the painful cost of reform. Regarded as the most dramatic child welfare reform effort in decades, Illinois' experience teaches us that children and families are the primary victims of system failures.

Caseworkers, the first responders, are often tossed to the political wolves as scapegoats. . Children are placed into care at alarming rates as all partners in child welfare, including the courts, legal advocates and caseworkers seek safety from tragedies. This "foster care panic" escalates the cost of child welfare. Foster care panic has cost Illinois taxpayers over \$450 million due to unnecessary foster care placements during the early 1990's. The cost to children and families represents the real tragedy of this "foster care panic". In 1993 a Chicago Tribune editorial labeled the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services as the "poster child of government indifference and incompetence". Five years later the same editorial pages praised the amazing turnaround of the Illinois child welfare system.

The statistics alone don't tell the story but they are sobering reminders of the cost of ignoring the health and well being of your child welfare system.

1. The number of children in substitute care more than doubled between 1993 and 1997 going from 23,000 to 52,000.

Reform efforts reduced this number to 21,000 by 2003.

2. Caseloads of workers were 4 to 6 times the recommended national standards.

Reform efforts resulted in the Illinois system becoming fully accredited by the Council on Accreditation of Services to Children and Families. Caseloads are at national standards.

3. Turnover of child welfare staff ranged from 40% to 80% in both the public and private sector.

Reform efforts reduced turnover rates at DCFS to 6% to 8% in direct service staff in 2003.

4. The number of children placed in out of state residential facilities rose rapidly to 800 by 1995.

Reform efforts reduced the use of out of state facilities to less than 20 cases.

5. The median length of stay of children in care rose to five years by 1994.

Reform efforts in the child welfare system and in the Cook county juvenile court led to dramatic reductions in children in care through increased adoptions, guardianships and reunifications. The median length of stay was reduced to 25 months. Over 25,000 foster children were adopted between 1997 and 2002.

6. Children were unnecessarily removed from families or remained in unsafe families.

Reform efforts reduced the number of children coming into care in Cook County from over 10,000 in 1994 to 1850 in 2002. At the same time safety, as measured by recurrence of abuse, was reduced by 50%.

These numbers and the improvements are impressive but it should never have been necessary to mount major reform efforts when the wise choice would have been to have done the work right in the first place.

BEYOND THE NUMBERS-THE SYMPTOMS OF SYSTEM FAILURE

There are always signals that systems are not performing well but it seems that it takes tragedies to get the political and public attention necessary to support child welfare system improvements. The poor performance of the Illinois system was clear as it failed to meet any reasonable safety, permanency and well-being outcomes. The effort necessary to change the system does not reflect the damage done to the system's critical infrastructure of caseworkers, foster parents and juvenile courts. Some of these conditions deeply impacted the life of the system and strategies for reform had to address these conditions directly.

1. Leadership for the direction of the system was absent. People within the system acted as if they were the victims of the tragedies. Perhaps, in many respects, they were also victims.
2. Media stories and politics shaped the system in critical and unnecessary ways. Family preservation services, instead of being improved, were abandoned out of fear of future tragedies.
3. Innovation and strategic planning disappeared from the landscape. Crisis management for organizational survival replaced concern over performance and quality improvement efforts.

4. The public sector became closed and defensive in the face of criticism. Staff and private agencies were scapegoated for system failures. There appeared to be a heavy investment in the failure of DCFS which only fed the growing distrust of the child welfare system.

In this climate everyone was clearly losing. The absence of direction contributed to wrong and wasteful spending by both the public and private sector. Artificially high caseloads led many in the private sector to make investments in their infrastructure for which there would be no real need as the system reformed. No part of the system functioned well including the courts. This era of fear and panic that characterized the Illinois child welfare system led to major investments and poor outcomes.

The major lesson must be that these child welfare systems are fragile and demand leadership from all partners to succeed in their mission of keeping children safe and families strong. The cost of system failure in human and financial terms is beyond anyone's imagination. The leadership challenge belongs not just to the public sector, but to all partners.

LESSONS TO PONDER IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

The leadership of the private sector, the unions, the courts and other advocates and staff in the Illinois child welfare system became the change agents for the system. All partners took to the challenge of leading the change. DCFS staff led the effort to achieve accreditation within the agency even as they struggled with staff shortages and inadequate resources. Their commitment was equaled by their private sector counterparts. The need for change was embraced by almost all partners and work to reform the system began on many fronts. The work continues today as it should. Some parting thoughts;

1. Treat the child welfare system as your "emergency room" of human services. Ensure it has the resources necessary to competently respond to the safety needs of children.
2. Recognize that caseworkers drive the cost of the system. Support them so they can succeed. No one is more important a successful child welfare system than a competent, adequately resourced workforce.
3. Focus on performance. Expect positive outcomes and shape ongoing discussions and planning on the need to achieve improved outcomes.
4. Insist on quality. Build systems that achieve accreditation. Nothing builds a better infrastructure for success as does accreditation.
5. Partnerships are critical. Build strong partnerships with the courts, private and public sector, advocates, foster parents, school and communities and all those who care about children. It is hard work. It must be done in the best of times if these partnerships are to be there in the worst of times.
6. Focus on safety. The number one responsibility of the child welfare system is to ensure that all children under its responsibility are safe. This is everyone's responsibility.

7. Pay attention to the financing of the system. Remember that what happens in Washington, D.C. does matter to state and local child welfare programs. Federal financing can either help or hurt local efforts to improve child welfare. Make it your business to educate political leadership as to critical needs of the system.
8. Recognize the leadership role the private sector has played in shaping the nation's child welfare system. The public sector needs your leadership.
9. Demand excellence from everyone in the system.

The history of child welfare has been written by the voluntary leadership in this country. You have led in innovation and investment. You have created standards for care that raise the bar for quality. You have kept community partners together in this cause for better child welfare systems. There could not have been a child welfare turnaround in Illinois without the private sector leadership. Bring your ideas and concerns to the public sector table. More importantly, bring and keep the public sector and all partners at the table, in good times and bad, so that we may keep building better child welfare systems.