

IMPROVING CLIENT OUTCOMES IN PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS THROUGH BETTER MANAGEMENT OF THE PURCHASE OF SERVICES

Prepared by Jess McDonald

The world of public child welfare has changed dramatically in the last several decades. Public child welfare was once the forgotten program in state and local government but tragedies and lawsuits moved it to the front burner in most executive offices at every level of government. The cost of poorly run child welfare systems exploded as caseloads rose rapidly with seemingly no relief in sight. The cost of what some critics call “foster care panic” led to double digit budget growth in state child welfare systems. Foster care became one of the fastest growing programs in government while offering poor outcomes to the children and families it was intended to serve. This poor performance led to Congressional action, prompting a performance review of all state child welfare programs. This review, known as the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), focused on the outcomes of state systems as well as a variety of contributing factors to poor performance. By the time this review process concluded in early 2004, every state had failed.

This record of failure is not the entire story. With passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997, Congress authorized bonus payments for adoptions in order to improve state performance in achieving permanencies for foster children. At the time, outside observers remarked that even federal legislation embraced by then President Clinton would not be enough to shake what many regarded as an entrenched and apathetic child welfare bureaucracy. To the surprise of many, 33 states doubled their performance in adoptions over the five years that followed passage of ASFA. This incentive program was hailed a stunning success, leading critics and advocates alike to ponder whether or not incentives played a role in encouraging better outcomes for children.

The reality behind this nationally touted success is that state child welfare systems adopted strategies that altered the course of performance dramatically; adoptions increased, the reunification of children with their families improved and fewer children were removed from their homes and placed into foster care. Key strategies in securing these results include performance based contracting, system accreditation, “front end” improvements, community-based partnerships, court reforms and statutory changes. Successful system reform means leveraging multiple strategies as states attempt to better manage both the “legacy” cases languishing in care and continuing to manage the challenges at the front end. This was the Illinois strategy. Understandably, the work involved in improving the performance of child welfare systems is a new and complex demand for jurisdictions everywhere, but for those who have tried and succeeded as well as those who have tried and failed, there are a few key lessons worth bearing in mind.

LEADERSHIP AND VISION ARE FUNDAMENTAL TO SYSTEM CHANGE.

The focus on client based outcomes requires a hard look at all aspects of leading and managing the child welfare enterprise. The most important task leadership has in changing and improving these volatile systems is setting vision and setting strategy. There is an expression that “leaders do the right thing and managers do things right.” In child welfare both are necessary.

The first step is to chart a course that is about begins and ends with better outcomes. This isn't about determining a specific method or strategy for reform like performance contracting or privatization, but rather fixing those goals necessary to improve results for children and families served by the child welfare system. Are there too many children entering the system? Should there be more adoptions in shorter timeframes? Are foster care placements stable and are children getting necessary services and achieving in school? Can substance-affected families succeed in treatment programs? These are big questions, but the work starts here—what improvements does the system need.

Understanding current system performance is critical to setting new or more aggressive goals. Analytical reviews of current performance and working to discover where opportunities for improvement might exist is the next move. Basic data systems and case reviews offer a good, objective start on this analysis, but it's important not to stop there. Conversations with stakeholders will inform the analysis of data. Conversations with caseworkers and supervisors and especially foster parents will offer a depth to this analysis that is indispensable to developing the right strategy.

One more step is helpful in establishing a meaningful outcome framework. Look for comparable systems in your state or the country that you consider to be good performers. Review their performance and consider laying out your performance next to theirs. Find out, when possible, what factors contributed to their success and what factors continue to hinder progress. Look to national benchmarks, but don't manage to benchmarks that are not good for children and families. For example, an agency can aggressively pursue adoption at the cost of appropriately responding to the needs of families--especially those battling substance abuse and addiction. A jurisdiction with weak supports for substance affected families cannot offer real “reasonable efforts” for families making termination a virtual default course for casework. The fixed goals for a child welfare system have real consequences for children and families—both good and unintended.

Once satisfied with the analysis and review of system performance, identify those priorities that make sense given the unique context of your organization. The next step is setting aggressive stretch goals that can challenge the organization, provider agencies and the system at large. Don't be afraid to think big. Daniel Burnham, a major city planner and the father of modern Chicago had it right when he said “Make no small plans.” Changing a child welfare system is no less complex. Think big, and avoid the temptation of settling on a pathway that guarantees success but ultimately compromises real change.

COMMUNICATING AND NEGOTIATING STRATEGIES FOR GOAL ACHIEVEMENT IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS.

Even after the decisions around performance areas and benchmarks have been settled, real work still remains. The challenge now is leading others toward this vision for change. In child welfare, the real work begins and ends in the field. If you've done your homework, persuading stakeholders that this new vision is the right direction and that the identified goals are attainable will not be as daunting as it sounds. This work opens the door to discussing the perceived barriers to getting results. Child welfare leadership now should turn to the field for information about the barriers to achieving client based outcomes. Simple techniques such as case readings by program managers and leadership with direct service staff reveal common understandings of the opportunities for improvement. Another technique is to mine your data for better understandings of trends in services. Are your new cases different from cases that came into the system in the last several years? Analysis of special problems by your quality assurance staff with program staff can reveal a deeper understanding of problem areas. Some of these would include multiple placements by children in foster care, high rates of use of residential care including high ejection rates by facilities. Excessive use of psychiatric care by foster children also lends itself to more intense analysis. Such a review might reveal weaknesses in basic supports to foster parents and the need for improved mental health services. These may seem obvious concerns but they are usually not reviewed until there is a tragedy or a lawsuit.

Armed with this additional information system leadership can begin conversations about change. It's important to negotiate with participants how specific barriers to goal achievement can be addressed and then commit to action. Any commitment to increasing operating resources should be explicitly tied to expected improvements in performance. Improved performance can be the source of resources, in the form of savings, which can be better reallocated to address performance barriers. Clearly, not every barrier can be completely addressed, but this doesn't preclude taking a few initial steps toward solving your larger problems. There is enormous leverage which can be brought to bear from the child welfare bureaucracy; contracts and casework policies can be changed, redundancies in procedures can be eliminated, paperwork reduced. Take advantage of these levers when it makes sense. Finally, regular performance monitoring and tracking the elimination of performance barriers can be powerful assets in shaping the midcourse corrections necessary for large-scale success.

One fundamental principle applies to all this work; the rules apply to public and private agency alike. Anyone doing the work should be subject to both the risks and rewards of improving performance. This means that the playing field for public and private service providers should be as level as possible. Ultimately, you are responsible for a system that includes public agency employees, private agencies and the community based agencies who serve children and families. Everyone should operate under the same set of rules.

Child welfare executives involved in large systems with a mix of public and private providers have learned that you do not escape responsibility or liability for appropriate service to children and families simply by contracting the work out. When performance stalls or even worse—goes in the wrong direction—no one sorts blame by the public and private sector. Ultimately accountability falls on one child welfare system—your system.

USE INFORMATION STRATEGICALLY TO MANAGE AND MONITOR PERFORMANCE.

Most arguments in child welfare performance are about misinformation. It is critical that the management of your care for children and families not be “argument based”. Establish detailed monitoring systems that allow everyone from caseworkers to agency directors to know and understand the status of the work. Keep performance information in front of stakeholders on a frequent and regular basis. Discuss openly the status of performance—successes and failures alike. This includes ranking the performance of direct service units, regions or offices in the public sector as well as the performance of contracted agencies in the private sector, especially if competition is an important of the strategy for accomplishing system reforms. In Illinois, agency performance in foster care was routinely reviewed and shared with members of the private sector. In the end, I think we thought that even more public approaches, such as web site posting, could have been a powerful tool for driving toward better results.

REWARD AND SANCTION PERFORMANCE.

One of the most dangerous practices of public managers is their inability to manage staff to achieve improved outcomes. It is not uncommon for new work to be shuttled onto the backs of the best workers while less than adequate performers are put on “hold” for new assignments. When good performers leave the system in response to this kind of inequitable treatment, managers are inevitably stunned. The same is true of agency systems. It is critical that those leading public systems hold everyone accountable for performance. This means everyone should know the rules of performance, including sanctions (possible loss of contract or job) and rewards (possible bonus payments), and everyone should be held to the rules. Failure to execute the rules sends a message that this entire effort is not a serious one. You cannot afford to have the system doubt your commitment to improved performance.

AVOID GIMMICKS AND POLITICAL RESPONSES TO SERIOUS PROGRAM CONCERNS.

If you focus on client based outcomes and build deliberate strategies for getting there, you will find many approaches to success. I would advise against buying high profile strategies as your first course of action. Illinois’ “performance contracting”, Kansas’ “privatization” model, New York City’s performance program and still other models are helpful lessons, but they are not in and of themselves the “right” model for every setting.

Keep in mind what makes sense for the child welfare system in front of you. Focus on the client based outcomes, first and foremost, and then look to your strengths and weaknesses, relevant lessons from other jurisdictions, and then build strategies that get performance.

Remember many of these high profile reform efforts were conducted on a large scale. Their success is not really an indication that the same results could be realized in smaller jurisdictions. Take the lessons that can be learned and then fashion the approach that fits best for your setting.

REMEMBER; IT IS ABOUT PRACTICE AND THE FIELD.

The field makes the decisions that shape the cost and outcomes of the child welfare system. Practice is what they do. Safety decisions are made best by staff with reasonable workloads, good training and solid supervision. Permanency depends on a trusting and consistent relationship between a caseworker, child, foster parent and family. This relationship is what determines the outcome of cases and that means reasonable caseloads so caseworkers can actually have time to see and work with clients.

OTHER SYSTEMS DETERMINE YOUR SUCCESS; CHANGE THEM ALSO!

The most significant problem of child welfare families is alcohol and substance abuse. Reviews of success by child welfare families in treatment suggest that 75% either drop out of treatment or never enter treatment. This abysmal outcome only condemns them to an expedited termination of parental rights. The alcohol and substance abuse field has work to do in changing its approach to treatment if these families are to have any chance of reaching recovery. Child welfare leaders can speak to this issue and should. You are being held accountable for speedy permanencies and face criticism for being insensitive to the plight of families afflicted with substance abuse problems. This may well be the most challenging issue facing your system as it seeks to improve performance.

REMEMBER: IT IS NOT ABOUT NUMBERS, IT IS ABOUT OUTCOMES!

Just as you can be trapped by political gimmicks you can be driven by false objectives such as number games. Getting to lower overall caseloads for the wrong reasons is probably just plain wrong. Keep your focus on your children and families and what they need and frame opportunities for them to be safely together and you will achieve the results you need. Your vision about the children and families to whom you are responsible is your compass. Keep your vision clear and open to new possibilities. Never underestimate your impact on the system as its leader.