Child Protection Systems in Crisis: 
Developing More Effective Responses

Most states’ CPS systems are periodically in crisis following high profile apparent failures in child protection. These crises have a powerful political dimension when key legislators, influential child advocates and editorial writers assert that a child welfare system is “broken”, and call for a comprehensive review of child protection practices.

It is a common (but not universal) feature of these crises that comprehensive reviews, or in-depth media reports, find that CPS units have been overwhelmed by workload demands which have been intensified by annual turnover rates in line units of 30-50%. In a December 21st newspaper story in the Kansas City Star about Missouri’s CPS system, a CPS supervisor was quoted as stating, “We can’t make the right decisions when we don’t see our families enough, we’re so overwhelmed by paperwork, and all kinds of other things that cases involve… we can’t do it and we’re not going to make the right decisions in that kind of environment.” A supervisor in St. Louis County, Missouri maintained that some investigators have been receiving 8-10 new investigations per week, when a reasonable level of assignment would be closer to 8-10 new investigations per month. This same news story found that the annual turnover rate among caseworkers in Jackson County (Kansas City), Missouri had reached 46%. In Missouri, the resignation of veteran caseworkers and supervisors has intensified the sense of crisis in an agency that pays 1170 caseworkers and supervisors $32,000 per year or less, the lowest caseworker salaries in the country, according to Kansas City Star reporters.

During the past year in Arizona, a turnover rate of 30% or higher has led to an intractable backlog of 6500 uninvestigated CPS reports, a backlog which has been reduced by more than half since the Governor authorized the use of overtime pay as needed. In Los Angeles County, 1600 caseworkers recently went on strike for several days over workload and pay issues. A union spokesperson claimed that caseworkers in Los Angeles were assigned an average of 19 cases per caseworker, compared to about 9 cases per investigator in New York City. New Jersey has recently adopted a standard of 8 new investigations per month and 12 open cases at a point in time compared to 12 new investigations per month, a CPS workload standard utilized in a number of states or large cities.

A recent story in the Kansas City Star quoted Clark Peters, an Assistant Professor in the University of Missouri School of Social Work: “What Missouri is experiencing is, terrible to say, it’s a typical experience … child welfare is a heart breaking field …” Both in Arizona and Missouri, as in many other states, child advocates and agency managers must overcome legislators’ skepticism that budget increases and additional caseworkers and supervisors will resolve a child welfare crisis that seems to recur every few years with distressing regularity. Public agency staff may share legislators’ skepticism since past attempts to “fix “ child protection in many states have been short lived responses to a political crisis, and may have
led to an increase of prescriptive policies and procedures that have worsened public agencies’ workload problems without having a positive effect on hoped for outcomes.

Reflections on Reforms of Child Protection Systems

The most common approach to reforming child protection systems following high profile child deaths has been to mandate practices and procedures which, if followed in a systematic way, might have prevented the most recent child death or deaths that resulted in public outrage and led to a widespread view that the state’s CPS system cannot be counted on to protect at-risk children. Sometimes, these reform efforts include the implementation of new assessment tools and/or practice models, along with large investments in training and quality assurance systems. However, adding mandates to CPS programs that already have practice and procedural requirements that sometimes fill hundreds of pages in policy and procedural manuals is a tough sell to caseworkers and supervisors already overwhelmed by workload requirements. In addition, one-off training programs tend to have modest effects, if any, on caseworkers’ practice.

Nevertheless, there have been few instances in which adoption of new practice models really did transform a child welfare agency’s practice, and in these situations several factors combined to make dramatic improvements possible:

- A political crisis resulting from media attacks and the intense dissatisfaction of both child advocates and legislators with the jurisdiction’s child welfare system led to unrelenting external pressure and an internal readiness for change.
- An unprecedented infusion of new resources (see below) resulting from IV-E waivers and/or class action lawsuits/settlement agreements, or in a small number of instances, a political establishment’s determination to transform the jurisdiction’s child welfare system combined with strong philanthropic support.
- A strong commitment, i.e., “buy-in”, of agency staff at all levels of the agency.
- Leaders who won the trust and confidence of child welfare agency staff, external stakeholders and key legislators.
- An agency’s commitment to a practice model that remained strong following leadership changes.

Unfortunately, this set of conditions rarely occurs and is exceedingly difficult to orchestrate. In particular, policymakers and agency managers usually underestimate what is required to achieve “buy-in”, i.e., commitment of child welfare staff, including management teams, to new practices/practice models, and mistake absence of dissent, or compliance with implementation plans, as “buy-in”. Internal resistance to change, initiative fatigue, concerns about workload and resources, or reasonable concerns about proposed practice changes or practice models must be overcome in a way that engenders hope and belief of agency staff in the possibility of a much improved child welfare system, not simply induces compliance with top managers’ directives. The more sweeping the practice changes which are envisioned by agency leaders, the more internal “champions” of the proposed changes are required to reach a critical mass of genuine excitement about the new practices/model. Following implementation of new practices or practice model, if the enthusiasm and belief of caseworkers and supervisors quickly deteriorates into weary or resentful compliance with directives in policy and procedural manuals, practice oriented reforms have run their course. Compliance is as far from commitment as love is from morally correct behavior.
Resource Enhancements: How Much Is Enough?

Imagine states in which the public child welfare agency’s budget is $500-600 million dollars per year. Child welfare crises in these states sometimes result in legislative enhancements of 3-5% of an agency’s annual budget, i.e., 20-30 million dollars. This is a significant budget enhancement in normal years, much less in years when state legislatures must cope with budget deficits. Some of this increased funding is likely to be spent on additional caseworkers in order to relieve workload pressures, and on new or expanded services needed to implement a new practice model. However, in several states (e.g., Illinois, New Jersey) where lasting transformations of child welfare systems have occurred, hundreds of millions of dollars of enhancements (amounting to 50% or more of a child welfare agency’s annual budget) have been invested in service enhancements or in staff increases over at least a decade.

It is a rare circumstance in which the idea of investing hundreds of millions of additional dollars in a child welfare agency widely perceived to be failing in its child protection mission would be seriously considered by legislators pressured from every direction for increased funding of state supported programs. For the most part, it has been class action lawsuits/settlement agreements or IV-E waivers in states or counties with high rates of out-of-home care that have led to these massive new investments in public child welfare systems. Class action lawsuits and settlement agreements that greatly increase the prescriptive requirements (e.g., practices, measures) with which child welfare agencies must comply without greatly increasing resources may do more harm than good. However, there have been a few settlement agreements that resulted in resource enhancements large enough to be “game changers.” IV-E waivers create the opportunity of reinvestment of savings resulting from reductions in foster care expenditures in new or enhanced services and programs. IV-E waivers are an opportunity to reshape a child welfare agency’s service delivery system, but they have dramatic effects on child welfare systems only when agencies are able to make large reductions in numbers of children in foster care or in average foster care costs per child, for example by reducing the number of youth in expensive residential care programs.

It is worth considering why such huge investments have been required to make fundamental changes in some public child welfare agencies. Some states and large counties have needed to reduce caseloads by more than half through the addition of hundreds of new FTEs. Furthermore, it is not enough to hire more caseworkers; administrative support staff, supervisors and middle management positions must also be added to build infrastructure and bring workloads under control. In addition, states that want to develop more family friendly child protection programs must usually greatly increase funding for family support programs and services that provide an alternative to foster care. Given the opportunity, public child welfare agencies usually make investments in programs which will find permanent homes for “legacy youth” growing up in foster care or residential care and in services needed to make foster care a therapeutic experience for troubled children and youth. In most states, large investments have been needed to “retool” child welfare systems in order to make family support an integral part of child protection systems and implement evidenced based programs.

Investing in a Stable and Professional Workforce
A common mistake in child protection reform initiatives in most states has been to make inadequate token investments in workforce development. Most efforts at comprehensive reform include additional casework positions required to stop CPS “meltdowns” and temporarily reduce workloads, but do not increase caseworkers’ and supervisors’ salaries enough to reduce turnover or make strategic investments in the professional development of agency staff other than to fund a few days of training related to practice improvements. Paying caseworkers and supervisors paraprofessional salaries less than 200% of the federal poverty standard, or paying experienced staff top-out salaries less than what they can earn in schools, hospitals or private agencies will not stabilize a workforce. CPS investigation and assessment usually takes a couple of years to learn to a reasonable level of expertise. Annual turnover rates of 25-50% guarantee that many CPS units will be staffed largely with inexperienced caseworkers, a number of whom will likely be planning to leave CPS at the first opportunity.

Public child welfare agencies are often managed with the expectation of high turnover in CPS units. In many agencies around the country, CPS investigation is an entry level position. Experienced CPS caseworkers, in turn, will often transfer to other units as opportunities present themselves, if they do not first leave the public child welfare agency for greener pastures.

The dominant managerial paradigm in public child welfare has been to standardize job functions so that they can be performed by entry level staff without professional preparation or commitment to a career in child protection. The idea that standardized assessment tools can substitute for expertise gathered from experience has been a persistent managerial error in child protection, and partly accounts for the widespread misuse of these tools. However, it has been the use of steadily expanding policy and procedural frameworks to mandate “best practices” that has created a bureaucratic morass in child welfare agencies that caseworkers and supervisors often find intolerable. Professionals need standards, guidelines and a knowledge base; they do not need prescriptive frameworks that attempt to dictate their every move.

In order to dramatically improve child protection systems, policymakers and managers should adopt the goal of attracting and developing a stable professional workforce. To this end, the following practices will be useful:

- Pay caseworkers and supervisors salaries which will attract and retain professional social workers. These salaries will vary from state to state, but they must be high enough to recruit MSWs and retain experienced caseworkers who have achieved a high degree of professionalism in their work, regardless of their educational backgrounds.
- Public child welfare agencies should make a commitment to workload management that goes far beyond defusing the most recent child welfare crisis. When agencies have high turnover rates, units with vacancies need immediate access to a pool of trained staff that can help with investigations until the vacant position can be filled. States’ child welfare agencies should periodically invest in workload studies to develop an empirical basis for workload standards and for budget requests.
- Public agencies should develop incentives for professional development of their staff, including funding of enrollment in certification programs in substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, child development, developmental disabilities, culturally competent practice, etc. Practitioners with a job relevant certification should receive a 5-10% increase in salary.
• Public agencies should develop a Child Welfare Professional track that requires a Master’s degree, a job relevant certification and three continuous years of above average performance ratings. A Child Welfare Professional should receive at least a 10% increase in salary, and be eligible for a 4 month educational sabbatical every four years.
• Child Welfare Professionals should be expected to mentor newly hired caseworkers, and received a small amount of compensation for doing so.
• Public agencies should develop leadership development programs that encourage initiative, “ownership” and creativity, and develop eligibility requirements that allow all agency employees to apply to the program.

Conclusion

Most comprehensive reforms of child protective services have had short lived superficial effects for three main reasons:

1. Child welfare managers have underestimated the importance of their staff’s commitment to proposed practice changes, and have misunderstood what is required to make practice changes at the unit level real and lasting. Absent enthusiasm and persistent effort at the line level to make new practices or practice models work, practice reforms quickly become cosmetic, just another set of requirements in a steadily expanding bureaucratic framework.

2. Policymakers have underestimated by several orders of magnitude the resource enhancements needed to adequately staff child welfare agencies in crisis and “retool” their service delivery systems.

3. The goal of developing a far more stable and professional workforce has not been front and center in states’ reform initiatives where it belongs. Some states continue to pay child welfare caseworkers and supervisors paraprofessional salaries, and most states continue to act as if standardizing expectations in policy manuals is the only reliable way to achieve consistent application of “best practices”. The position of CPS investigator in many states remains an entry level position which newly hired caseworkers often aspire to leave as soon as possible.

There have been several instances in which states, large counties or cities have adopted different strategies to child welfare reform: Alabama, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Illinois, New Jersey, New York City, Utah. These public child welfare systems have not been immune to crises following their reforms; but when these crises have occurred, child welfare managers in these jurisdictions no longer had to overcome despairing attitudes of advocates, policymakers and practitioners that question whether effective responses to child protection challenges can be found.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this commentary are the author’s, and are not intended to represent the views of Casey Family Programs or any other organization.