NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

New Jersey's Child Welfare Outcomes Report

2017

New Jersey's Child Welfare Outcomes Report provides a detailed summary of child welfare outcomes across a variety of safety, stability, and permanency measures for children in their own home and children in out-of-home placement.

Allison Blake, Ph.D., L.S.W.
Commissioner

Executive Summary

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF), Division of Child Protection and Permanency (CP&P) is committed to its mission to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children and to support vulnerable families. The department relies on quantitative and qualitative data to inform our decision making, service array, and case practice. This report focuses on longitudinal, quantitative data measuring outcomes of children served by CP&P.

This report focuses on (1) safety of children in their own home; (2) safety, siblings, and stability for children in out-of-home placement; (3) timely permanency; and (4) post-reunification and re-entry.

- ***Safety of Children in their own Home*** provides an analysis of findings related to the recurrence of maltreatment after an initial report/finding of child abuse and/or neglect, while in the child remains in their own home.

    - ***Key Chapter Findings:***
        - The percentage of children to experience a recurrence of maltreatment increased between 2011 and 2013, but has since stabilized.
        - As of December 31, 2016 a substantial majority (86 percent) of children served by CP&P were served in their own homes

- ***Safety, Siblings & Stability for Children in Out of Home Placement*** examines maltreatment of children in out-of-home placements, the practice of placing sibling groups together and ensuring placement stability for children in out-of-home placement.

    - ***Key Chapter Findings:***
        - There was a significant decrease in CP&P's out-of-home placement population from over 12,000 children in 2004 to 6,700 children in 2016.

        - CP&P has maintained a steady performance in placing siblings together from 2007-2016.
        - DCF has met the performance target for placement stability for the first time with 84 percent of children experiencing two or fewer placements within the first year of placement.
        - Children being placed in a kinship home upon entry into out-of-home has increased almost 30 percent from 2010 to 2016.
        - From 2007 (9.1 percent) to 2016 (4.8 percent) New Jersey has reduced initial placements into a congregate care setting by almost 50 percent.

- ***Timely Permanency*** focuses on the time it takes for a child to be discharged from out-of-home placement to a permanent setting such as reunification, live with relative, adoption or kinship legal guardianship.

    - ***Key Chapter Findings:***
        - The median length of stay for children served by CP&P in out-of-home placement was about 10 months in 2015.
        - Almost 40 percent of the children who entered out-of-home placement in 2012 were reunified with their parents within the first 12 months.

- The final chapter reviews ***Post Reunification Maltreatment & Re-Entry***, and provides an analysis of children's long term success after returning home from out-of-home placement.

    - ***Key Chapter Findings:***
        - CP&P met the performance target for post-reunification maltreatment.
        - Re-entries into out-of-home placement remain a challenge.

WHY THE WORKFORCE MATTERS

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute
Learning, Leading, Changing

CHILD WELFARE WORK ISN'T EASY

- ✓ Demanding caseloads
- ✓ A high degree of uncertainty
- ✓ Life and death decisions
- ✓ Trauma for children and families
- ✓ Traumatic stress
- ✓ Bureaucratic system
- ✓ External oversight and scrutiny

The child welfare workforce provides services and supports to keep vulnerable children, youth, and families safe, stable, and healthy.

TURNOVER IS COSTLY

Cost for each worker leaving an agency:

$54,000[1]

REDUCED TURNOVER MEANS

- ✓ Timely investigations
- ✓ More contacts/visits with children, families, and resource families
- ✓ Better service delivery
- ✓ Improved safety, permanency, and well-being

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS MATTER

Address workforce issues with multiple strategies based on principles of equity, tolerance, respect, and diversity.

CLICK HERE to view NCWWI's Workforce Development Framework

- Job analysis & position requirements
- Education & professional preparation
- Recruitment, screening & selection
- Incentives & work conditions
- Professional development & training
- Organizational environment
- Community context
- Supervision & performance management

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
\+ EFFECTIVE WORKFORCE
= POSITIVE OUTCOMES

[1]Complete reference list: https://ncwwi.org/files/Why_the_Workforce_Matters_References.pdf

Children's Bureau

ChapinHall at the University of Chicago
Policy research that benefits children, families, and their communities

partners forourchildren
Building a Case for Change

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24

Executive Summary

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2010

child welfare

people can and routinely do remain in foster care until their 21st birthday, whereas foster youth in Iowa and Wisconsin typically age out around the time they turn 18.

Living Arrangements

At the time of their wave 4 interview, 49 percent of the young adults in the Midwest Study were living in their "own place," and 21 percent were living with their biological parents or other relatives. Sixteen percent of the male study participants were incarcerated.

Since exiting foster care, over two-thirds of the young adults in the Midwest Study had lived in at least three different places, including 30 percent who had lived in five or more places. Even more concerning, 24 percent of these young adults had ever been homeless, 28 percent had ever couch surfed, and 37 percent had ever been homeless or couch surfed since exiting foster care.[2] One-half of the young people who had been homeless had been homeless more than once. Repeated episodes of couch surfing were even more common, with two-thirds of the young people who had couch surfed having done so on more than one occasion.

Relationships with Family of Origin and Social Support

Despite having been removed from home and placed in foster care, almost all of the Midwest Study participants had maintained family ties and, in many cases, those ties were quite strong. Seventy-nine percent reported feeling *very close*, and another 15 percent reported feeling *somewhat close*, to at least one biological family member. Likewise 81 percent of these young adults reported having contact with a biological family member at least once a week. In addition, between one-half and two-thirds reported that they had enough people in their social support network to whom they could turn for help with different types of needs

Foster Care Experiences and Preparation for Independent Living

Looking back, almost two-thirds of the Midwest Study participants agreed that they were lucky to have been placed in foster care, and well over half reported feeling satisfied with their experience while in the child welfare system. Almost three-quarters agreed that they were helped by their foster caregivers and almost two-thirds agreed that they were helped by their social worker. Although only one-quarter of these young people reported that they felt very prepared to be self-sufficient when they exited foster care,

[2] Being homeless was defined as "sleeping in a place where people weren't meant to sleep, or sleeping in a homeless shelter, or not having a regular residence in which to sleep" and couch-surfing was defined as "moving from one temporary housing arrangement provided by friends, family or strangers to another."

two-thirds reported that they felt very prepared to be self-sufficient at age 23 or 24. More than one-third of these young people reported that there was some training or assistance they wished they had received, but did not receive, while in foster care. Most commonly, they expressed a general need for training in independent living skills, especially budgeting and money management. Many also expressed a need for assistance with employment and housing.

Education

Our data suggest that the educational deficits with which foster youth approach the transition to adulthood persist into their early adult years and that they continue to lag behind their peers in the general population. By age 23 or 24, nearly one-quarter of the young adults in the Midwest Study did not have a high school diploma or a GED, and only 6 percent had a 2- or 4-year degree, although nearly one-third had completed at least one year of college. Compared to their Add Health Study counterparts, Midwest Study participants were over three times as likely *not* to have a high school diploma or GED, half as likely to have completed any college, and one-fifth as likely to have a college degree. They were also less likely to be enrolled in school, less likely to be pursuing postsecondary education if they were enrolled, and more likely to be enrolled in a 2-year college rather than 4-year college or graduate school if they were pursuing postsecondary education.

Employment and Earnings

Although 84 percent of the Midwest Study participants reported that they had ever held a job since leaving foster care, only 48 percent were currently employed, or 52 percent if the 45 young men who were currently incarcerated are excluded. This is significantly lower than the 76 percent of Add Health Study participants who currently had a job. Midwest Study participants who were employed reported working a mean of 37 and a median of 40 hours per week as well as mean and median hourly wages of $10.14 and $9.45, respectively. Their Add Health Study counterparts worked an average of 3 hours more per week for almost $4 more per hour.

Income and Assets

Almost three-quarters of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported any income from employment during the past year, but their median earnings were just $8,000. By comparison, 92 percent of their peers in the Add Health Study had any income from employment and their median earnings were $18,300. Many of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported income from other sources, especially family and friends. Nearly three-quarters of those who were married or cohabiting had income from their spouse's or partner's employment, but only 17 percent of those who were living with their children but not their children's other parent had received any child support. Fewer than half of the Midwest Study

participants had something as basic as a checking or savings account compared with 85 percent of their Add Health Study peers.

Economic Hardships

As another indicator of their precarious economic situation, almost half of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported experiencing at least one of five material hardships (i.e., not enough money to pay rent, not enough money to pay a utility bill, gas or electricity shut off, phone service disconnected, or evicted) during the past year compared with fewer than one-quarter of their Add Health Study peers. In addition, nearly 29 percent of these young adults would be categorized as having low or very low food security.

Receipt of Government Benefits

During the past year, three-quarters of the young women, including 89 percent of custodial mothers, and one-third of the young men in the Midwest Study had received benefits from one or more need-based government programs. A similar gender difference was also found in current benefit receipt. Seventy percent of the young women, including 85 percent of custodial mothers and 29 percent of the young men, were currently receiving benefits from one or more need-based government programs.

Access to Health Care Services

Fifty-seven percent of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported that they currently had health insurance compared with 78 percent of their Add Health counterparts. Moreover, although two-thirds of the Midwest Study participants who were insured were covered by Medicaid or S-CHIP, 73 percent of their Add Health Study counterparts were covered by insurance provided by their employer or their parents' insurance.

Pregnancy

More than three-quarters of the young women in the Midwest Study had ever been pregnant (compared with only 40 percent of their Add Health Study counterparts), two-thirds had been pregnant since leaving foster care, and two-thirds of those who had ever been pregnant had been pregnant more than once (compared with just over half of their Add Health Study counterparts). Almost two-thirds of the young women who had ever been pregnant indicated that their most recent pregnancy had been unplanned.

Sixty-one percent of the young men in the Midwest Study reported that they had ever impregnated a female partner compared with 28 percent of their Add Health Study counterparts, and 55 percent of the

young men who had ever impregnated a female partner indicated that the most recent pregnancy had been unplanned.

Marriage, Cohabitation, and Relationships

Forty percent of the young women and one-third of the young men in the Midwest Study were either married or cohabiting (i.e., living with a partner in a marriage-like relationship). Midwest Study participants were more likely to be cohabiting and less likely to be married than their Add Health Study counterparts. Half of the young women and 45 percent of the young men in the Midwest Study who were neither married nor cohabiting were involved in a relationship, and in most of those cases they were dating one partner exclusively.

Parenthood

Two-thirds of the young women and almost half of the young men in the Midwest Study reported that they had at least one child. Nearly all of the mothers but less than half of the fathers reported that one or more of their children was living with them. By contrast, over 60 percent of the fathers reported that one or more of their children was living somewhere else, primarily with the other parent, compared with only 17 percent of the mothers. Although those parents who were living with one or more of their biological children were generally not experiencing high levels of parenting stress, most acknowledged that being a parent was harder than they had expected.

Illegal Behavior and Criminal Justice System Involvement

Young men in the Midwest Study were more likely than young women to report that they had engaged in a variety of illegal behaviors during the 12 months prior to their interview. There were few differences in self-reported illegal behavior between the former foster youth and their Add Health Study counterparts. Midwest Study participants, especially the young men, reported a high level of involvement with the criminal justice system since their most recent interview. Forty-two percent of the young men compared with 20 percent of the young women reported that they had been arrested, 23 percent of the young men compared with 8 percent of the young women reported that they had been convicted of a crime, and 45 percent compared with 18 percent of the young women reported that they had been incarcerated.

Midwest Study participants also reported much higher cumulative levels of criminal justice system involvement than their Add Health counterparts. In fact, cumulative levels of criminal justice system involvement were higher among the young women in the Midwest Study than among the young men in the Add Health Study.

Victimization

Young men in the Midwest Study were more than twice as likely as young women to report that they had been the victim of a violent crime during the past 12 months, and Midwest Study participants were more likely to have been the victim of a violent crime during the past 12 months than their Add Health Study counterparts regardless of gender. Although only a small percentage of Midwest Study participants reported experiencing any type of sexual victimization since their last interview, young women were more than twice as likely to do so as young men.

Life Satisfaction and Future Orientation

Two-thirds of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their lives as a whole, more than half reported that lives have been better or much better since they exited foster care, and most reported feeling fairly to very optimistic about their futures. Although they also expressed a fair amount of optimism about their prospects for the future, they were consistently less optimistic about their prospects for the future than their Add Health Study counterparts.

Connectedness

Finally, youth aging out of foster care have been identified as being at high risk of becoming disconnected young adults)—that is, young adults who are neither working nor enrolled in school (Levin-Epstein & Greenberg, 2003; Wald & Martinez, 2003; Youth Transition Funders Group, 2004). Sixty percent of the young women and 58 percent of the young men were connected (i.e., working or enrolled in school) at age 23 or 24. Expanding our definition of connectedness to include custodial parents increases those percentages to 87 percent and 63 percent, respectively.

Trends over Time

We have been tracking the outcomes of the Midwest Study participants since they were 17 or 18 years old. As they move into their mid-twenties, we can begin to identify trends in the directions that their lives have taken across different domains including educational attainment and school enrollment, current employment, family formation, criminal justice involvement, and connectedness. A complete discussion of these trends can be found in the full report.

Baseline interviews were conducted with 732 foster youth (63 from Iowa, 474 from Illinois, and 195 from Wisconsin) between May 2002 and March 2003 who were either 17 or 18 years old. Eighty-two percent ($n = 603$) of these young people were re-interviewed between March and December 2004 when most were 19 years old and 81 percent ($n = 590$) were re-interviewed between March 2006 and January 2007 when nearly all were age 21. A fourth wave of survey data collected from 82 percent ($n = 602$) of the baseline sample between July 2008 and April 2009 when study participants were 23 or 24 years old.

Direct Service Workers' Recommendations for Child Welfare Financing and System Reform

January 2012

By Sean Hughes and Suzanne Lay

remaining fifth split between working in adoption and specialized services.

The vast majority of those questioned are veterans in the child welfare workforce. 73% answered that they have at least five years of experience and 40% have been in the field for a decade or more. These are professionals who are resilient and are overcoming the challenges that lead to the high turnover in the field. Only 15% of respondents reported being in the field for less than 3 years. Experience was predictably greatest with supervisors and administrators, but even among workers with predominantly frontline duties, 63% of respondents indicated that they have worked in child welfare for at least five years. The vast experience possessed by those surveyed at all levels of the field, and the wisdom and knowledge they have gained along the way, is beneficial for those interested in reforming the financing of child welfare.

When queried about their level of familiarity with current federal child welfare legislation and ongoing federal child welfare activity, 78% of frontline workers, 55% of supervisors, and 71% of administrators self-identified as either very familiar or somewhat familiar. Workers in public agencies were more likely to be familiar with federal policy, but the majority of both sectors are more familiar than not. This confirms an expected selection bias, considering workers responding to a policy survey are more likely to be interested in and following federal child welfare policy. Nonetheless, most participants were responding to the questions with some understanding of the federal partnership in responding to child maltreatment. Nobody reported that they were not at all familiar with federal policy.

Participants are experienced, work directly with children and families, and are knowledgeable about federal policy. They also work across the continuum of services as 36% are in child protective services, 43% are in foster care, 9% are in adoption and 12% are in specialized services. Their personal familiarity within the system and the lessons they have derived over the course of their careers were the focus of this project. CWLA believes these often overlooked voices can and should significantly contribute to the financing reform policy debate, as this focus group survey demonstrates.

Responses

Workforce

Because they work to improve difficult human experiences, it is vital that frontline workers be

CWLA Caseload Standards

Worker Type	Caseload Standard
Workers making initial CPS assessments	No more than 12 active reports per month
Workers providing ongoing CPS support	No more than 17 active families, assuming the rate of new families assigned is no more than one for every six open families
Working both making initial CPS assessments and providing ongoing CPS support	No more than 10 active ongoing families and no more than 4 active initial assessments.[5]
Worker providing Intensive Family-Centered Services	2-6 families
Worker providing Family-Centered Casework	No more than 12 families[6]
Worker counseling with birth families, preparing and assessing adoptive applicants for infant placements and supporting these families following placement	20-25 families
Worker preparing children for adoption who are older or who have special needs	10-12 children
Worker assessing and preparing adoptive applicants for the placement of children who are older or have special needs and providing support to these families following placement	12-15 families
Worker assessing and preparing adoptive applicants for inter-county adoption	30-35 families[7]
Family foster care social worker	12-15 children, depending on the level of services required to meet the assessed needs of each child[8]

For the Welfare of Children:

LESSONS LEARNED

from Class Action Litigation

January 2012

Center for the Study of Social Policy

New Jersey: A Case Study and Five Essential Lessons For Reform

Molly Armstrong, Eileen Crummy, Kevin Ryan and Lisa Taylor. The authors are partners in Public Catalyst (www.public-catalyst.com), an organization committed to supporting improvements in, and monitoring the reform of, public systems serving vulnerable children and youth.

In January 2006, when New Jersey's recently elected governor appointed us as members of a new child welfare leadership team, we came to the helm of a statewide system at a crossroads. The challenges were plentiful.

- The frontline staff were demoralized and burdened by unmanageable caseloads. They had a laundry list of expectations with an inadequate support system and too few resources, and, all too often, they awakened to alarming headlines about their child welfare system and that raised questions about their commitment and competence.
- There was a sharp rise in the number of foster children legally available for adoption, which was paired with a seismic gap in the system's capacity to complete adoptions. In addition, there was a severe shortage of available foster homes, and the shortage was only increasing despite a large public investment in recruitment and advertising.
- Scores of paper reports existed – mostly outdated – but there was little capacity to collect and verify, analyze and communicate critical, accurate and usable data to the field or to key stakeholders.
- The system was in a 30-month-old federal class action lawsuit settlement with a pending contempt motion by plaintiffs who were demanding a federal takeover of the system in the wake of the court-appointed oversight panel's report of significant state noncompliance with settlement terms.
- Most importantly, there was evidence that the children in the system were not safe, were not achieving permanency and were not receiving care to meet their own or their family's basic needs.

Shortly before the new governor's election, the lawsuit generated stinging headlines in no fewer than three television networks and seven newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Star Ledger*. While at first we viewed the inherited bad press as yet another of our challenges, we came to view the widespread news reports of system failures and the public skepticism it wrought, as an opportunity lever to push for change.

By January 2006, there was no serious stakeholder voice in New Jersey arguing that the existing reform plan was working for children and families, or that the large public investment had magically produced good outcomes. The consent decree, which frontloaded a variety of process and outcome improvements for children, had not had the desired effect. To the contrary, the most invested child welfare stakeholders yearned for a new way, a new plan and a new consent decree. The responsibility fell to us to negotiate with plaintiffs' counsel and work with them in partnership to build a bridge from chaos to reform, which would enable us to realize the outcomes of safety, permanency and well-being for children.

The talks between the plaintiffs' counsel and our team led to a modified settlement agreement, which radically redesigned the course of the reform. It made possible wide-ranging improvements for the state's vulnerable children and families. By the end of our tenure as a public leadership team, less than three years after we first assembled, New Jersey had:

- achieved consecutive annual state records for the most children to be adopted from the foster care system and reduced the number of legally free children awaiting adoption by 44 percent;

- achieved annual net gains in the number of foster families, more than 1,700 over three years and stemmed the downward spiral in the number of licensed homes, without spending additional funds on recruitment and advertising;
- safely reduced the number of children who were removed from their families, which lead to a significant overall reduction of the children in placement;
- reduced the incidence of maltreatment in care dramatically, which took the state from among the nation's worst performers to among its very best;
- improved staff morale and achieved a steep drop in the turnover rate, reduced worker caseloads to appropriate, manageable levels, and refocused the central office to be "of service to the field;"
- distilled agency reporting to a focused set of public reports with reliable data that became a working tool for agency staff and began to address stakeholders' desire for information; and
- four successive positive reports from the court-appointed monitor for building a stable platform for enduring reform and setting state records on a variety of important outcomes.

In leading the effort that achieved these and other positive developments for children and families, we applied certain core practice values that nurtured the reform movement in its infancy and led to a sustainable trajectory for change. The five most important lessons from our work are discussed below.

- **Lead "in service to the field."**
  Staff members who are treated with disrespect, who lack the basic tools necessary to get their work done – including training, working telephones and cars, manageable caseloads, access to services and a leadership team that is open to hearing what the staff need and what they think is wrong – will struggle. As a result, children and families will not get what they need.

  From the beginning, we believed that an effective approach to work with staff should mirror a model for how we wanted staff to treat the children and families we served. We needed to act with respect, to listen and to turn bureaucracy on its head so that instead of creating burdens, the central office resolved problems. We prioritized resources and support so that the field got what it needed first.

  Achieving manageable caseloads took some time, and we needed staff good will in the interim to slow the turnover rate and improve staff morale. We secured this good will by making ourselves available and doing whatever was necessary to provide immediate relief to the field. Getting a mechanic on site quickly after staff reported that there were broken cars sitting idle because of paperwork delays is not the stuff of policy papers, but resolving problems of bureaucracy and displaying day-to-day support for the staff made them believe in the possibilities of change. It also made it possible for them to complete their investigations in more timely fashion, visit families more frequently and secure more and better services for their clients.

  We decentralized authority to local management, removing layers of low-value centralized reviews, committed to clear communication of priorities and ensured that the staff knew we would hold ourselves responsible when something went wrong and not place the blame on them. We committed to accountability – and that accountability began at the top. Borrowing on a strategy from Bill Bratton, the former New York City police commissioner, we seized media opportunities to get the message out that we valued our staff. Our busy staff may or may not have read newsletters from the Department of Children and Families Commissioner, but we knew with certainty that either they or their families would read the *Star Ledger* or the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

- **Focus on the fundamentals.**
  Repairing a public system is like building a house: it begins with the foundation. A sense of urgency

is critical to any reform movement, but taking the time to develop a strong infrastructure is the only way to create positive change that endures. We must be urgent about the right things in a sensible order, and too often, we are urgent for outcomes at the expense of the fundamentals that make those outcomes more likely. The road to reform involves a logical sequencing of key initiatives that leaves behind the chaos and disappointment of the old, flawed system in order to travel toward a system that achieves positive outcomes for children and families. New Jersey's revised consent decree embraced this principle, bifurcating the work into two phases: the first phase focused on the fundamentals (e.g., massive efforts in recruiting, hiring, training and mentoring staff and aggressive foster and adoptive home growth). The second phase followed with service expansion and practice model implementation – ultimately leading to improved results. To our surprise, the strength of some of the early work hastened positive results elsewhere. For example, as the net number of foster and adoptive homes in New Jersey increased, caseworkers had better placement options for children, and existing homes became less strained. This led to a lower rate of maltreatment while in care.

- **Be strategic about quick wins.**
  Every system has strengths despite the popular caricature of child welfare systems. Diagnosing system strengths quickly and leveraging them to achieve important early accomplishments for children and families is critical to maintaining public support for a reform that, in the early going, is focused on infrastructure-heavy fundamentals that do not translate well into the public narrative. For example, New Jersey had a strong adoption history that had been compromised in 2004 and 2005. Among our system's many latent strengths, there was a cadre of committed, trained adoption staff ready to focus on permanency for children if we could provide supports to them and remove structural and resource barriers. We made commitments to ensure that legally free children were adopted in significant numbers throughout 2006 and 2007. And then we over-delivered on those promises.

  We changed the training delivery system almost overnight – something we could do from the central office. We committed and delivered on ensuring that newly hired staff entered training in under two weeks when previously, they had sometimes waited months for training. Existing staff were provided with a focused, organized in-service training menu, the content of which reflected our reform priorities with a rational delivery schedule that ensured office coverage. And, as previously stated, never underestimate the impact that working computers, cell phones and cars have on both morale and service delivery. Strategic, quick wins early in a reform movement can reinvigorate staff and the reform process by allowing time to breathe, to grow and to focus steadily on the fundamentals.

- **Be suspicious of conventional wisdom.**
  New Jersey spent significantly in 2004 and 2005 to recruit new foster homes, yet the system lost more homes than it gained in each of those years. Still, conventional wisdom in January 2006 urged us to address our foster home deficit by spending more public money to market aggressively to prospective families across the state. We resisted, despite considerable pressure, and instead worked to diagnose and understand the recruitment and licensure pipeline. Three months of intensive investigation and data analysis, followed by targeted piloting of model approaches, revealed structural communication and culture gaps that caused severe delays and poor customer service.

  A scenario that best exemplifies this problem came to our attention in the winter of 2006. Licensing inspectors were frequently failing applicant homes when they discovered stale batteries in the homes' smoke detectors. The existing structure dictated a process in which inspectors would leave

the home with its non-working smoke detector intact and send the licensing application back to the recruitment team. The recruitment team, in turn, scheduled a second appointment at the home, installed new batteries, and then returned the application to the licensure team for a third home visit and inspection. These inefficiencies took months and, worse, frustrated families, many of whom simply dropped out of the application process. Our pilot work allowed us to design a new model, which merged the licensure and recruitment divisions under one manager and created a single team that was deployed regionally to the field. Licensing inspectors were provided with tool kits that contained batteries and other common necessities, and they were authorized and expected to solve problems on the spot. It worked – more homes got licensed. No one was clamoring for that solution early on, but it proved much more effective than the popular solutions being heralded at the time.

Similarly, we resisted trying to dictate change by issuing new policies, which was the standard response. Our agency already had hundreds of pages of policies, some of which were confusing and contradictory, and our busy staff did not have much time to read. We limited new policy to critical issues – keeping that list short – but we mostly focused on achieving change by making the priorities clear, and encouraging creative responses that defied traditional structural silos – letting "a thousand flowers bloom." There is more than one good way to reach a good outcome, and our staff were in better positions to identify what would work. We decided it was best to pilot and test, and discard or tinker with what did not work, and grow what did. Policy development could follow later.

- **Everything cannot and should not be counted.**
Absent the type of comprehensive reform process required by a federal consent decree or, less frequently, willed by a committed chief executive, child welfare reform efforts are often piecemeal. They frequently culminate, for example, in a blue ribbon commission's recommendation for the agency to begin disclosing performance on a new set of measures or legislation with a raft of new reporting requirements. The trouble is that these requirements are frequently layered on top of the agency's existing reporting obligations, which accrue over time by statute, regulation, stakeholder request or each time a new agency head takes over. If, as a result, the child welfare system finds itself developing and publishing hundreds of regular data reports, as New Jersey did in January 2006, there is a real danger that the avalanche of information will have exactly the opposite of its intended effect: the system will not become more accountable; it will stay unfocused and ignore most or all of the information. Essential to our reform work was a commitment to manage by data, which began with identifying essential data that needed to be tracked followed by the often painful task of unmasking quality challenges with the data and developing solutions. We peeled back the rest and stopped publishing a multitude of reports.

  When determining which measures to use going forward, we considered three inter-connected sequential questions.

  First, seeing our staff as data consumers, we considered the pedagogical value of information to drive performance. In other words, we determined what we wanted our staff to view as important, and we worked hard to make data accessible – both conceptually and literally – on all desktops. We also ensured that the data were easy to understand. We used the data to set achievable but aggressive targets that were widely shared and used to celebrate success. Everyone knew how everyone else was doing, and that knowledge encouraged healthy competition and peer-to-peer learning.

Second, we considered what managers need to know to navigate the change process. In New Jersey, that included everything from the most basic demographic data on children in placement to office staffing levels, training enrollments, newly licensed foster homes, and child adoptions, among other measures.

Third, we considered the data needs of core constituencies whose good will was essential to the success of the reform: the governor, the legislature, advocates, plaintiffs' counsel and the court-appointed monitor. When the list of reports got too long, we did our best to scale back to produce only the core ones. Our chief goal was to create an appetite in our staff for managing by data, not continuing to churn reports for reports' sake.

The change process we helped launch in New Jersey in 2006 is now touching children and families in ways that seemed unimaginable back then. If this level of reform is possible in a state whose children struggled as mightily as they did in New Jersey, positive change in the foster care system is possible everywhere. A sick system in need of reform requires equal doses of strategy, forbearance, passion, discipline and an outcome plan that focuses first and foremost on the fundamentals.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Molly Armstrong
Molly Armstrong served as the Director of Policy and Planning for New Jersey's Department of Children and Families. She focused on re-engineering the foster and relative home recruitment and licensure process; designing a healthcare system for children in placement; and with the DCF team, building and implementing a reform process grounded in data and QA. She is currently leading the managing by data initiative in New Jersey; working with a variety of stakeholders in New York City on improving the connections between the education and justice systems; and supporting the child welfare reform effort in Michigan. Molly is a partner in Public Catalyst (www.public-catalyst.com) and received her undergraduate degree from Yale; a law degree from NYU; and a masters in law from Georgetown.

Eileen Crummy
Eileen Crummy spent her 33 year career in public child welfare in New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) where she rose through the ranks to become the agency's Director prior to serving as the Acting Commissioner of New Jersey's Department of Children and Families. As DYFS Director, Eileen led a workforce of 6,000 staff focusing them intently on achieving child welfare reform. Those efforts led to the creation of New Jersey's first case practice model, a systemic rethinking and reorientation of practice away from compliance towards outcomes, with an emphasis on family engagement. Eileen is a partner in Public Catalyst (www.public-catalyst.com) and currently serves as a monitor of Michigan's federal child welfare consent decree. She provides technical assistance to states and jurisdictions regarding the development of outcome-focused child welfare and human service programs.

Kevin Ryan
Kevin Ryan served as New Jersey's first Child Advocate and as the state's first commissioner of the Department of Children and Families, successfully launching a reform of child welfare and juvenile justice services. During his tenure, the State set successive state records in adoptions, foster family recruitment and safety for children in placement. He also shepherded the development of a model

family preservation and child abuse prevention network across the State. At Covenant House, he spent more than a decade on the frontlines with homeless, runaway and trafficked youth, and now serves as the agency's international president. He is a partner in Public Catalyst (www.public-catalyst.com) through which he serves by appointment of the federal court as a monitor of Michigan's child welfare consent decree and mediates dispute resolution between state agencies and advocates for children in foster care. A former Harvard Wasserstein Fellow and Skadden Fellow, he received his undergraduate degree from Catholic University; a law degree from Georgetown; and a masters in law from NYU.

Lisa Alexander-Taylor

Lisa Alexander-Taylor served as chief of staff in New Jersey's Department of Children and Families, deputy police director in Newark, NJ, and as a prosecutor in New York City. She has expertise in building and implementing public investigation, monitoring, and accountability systems; infrastructure design and support, and training system design, logistics and execution. Lisa is a partner in Public Catalyst (www.public-catalyst.com) and is currently leading sections of the managing by data initiative in New Jersey, and supporting the child welfare reform effort in Michigan.