

Child Welfare System

Office of Performance Evaluations
Idaho Legislature



Executive summary



Evaluation context

In public testimonies during the 2016 legislative session, policymakers heard dissatisfaction with Idaho's child welfare system. Problems faced by the system are not unique to Idaho and are seen by experts as exceptionally difficult to solve and manage.

In this evaluation we were able to identify gaps in the four key areas of the system:

- Out-of-home placements
- Workload challenges
- Organizational culture
- Systems approach

Together, these gaps prevent the state's child welfare system from performing at the high level of expectation set through policy making and program design processes.

Further, the findings of our own evaluation, supported by the findings of the research and evaluation of other groups, indicate that addressing the complex and entrenched problems of child welfare requires a systems approach with ongoing system-level accountability, collaboration, and oversight.



Out-of-home placements

When circumstances threaten the safety of a child, three large-scale efforts are necessary to achieve desirable results in out-of-home placements: (1) find an out-of-home placement, (2) support the out-of-home placement, and (3) facilitate a collaborative effort toward returning children and youth to their home as soon as possible or arranging for an alternative permanency option.

A worsening shortage of foster parents threatens the fidelity of the state's child welfare system. Finding an out-of-home placement can be a difficult and stressful process for social workers, foster parents, and children. Often several calls must be made before a foster parent will agree to bring children or youth into their home.

Because of the shortage, foster parents are asked to do more, stretch their capacity, or create more space in their home. To make a placement, social workers said they have apologetically asked foster parents to accept children or youth with characteristics or behaviors outside the foster parent's stated preferences, knowing the request would place additional strain on the family.

When social workers are not able to find an out-of-home placement near a child's home, they must turn to placement options outside of the area. Out-of-area placements solve the short-term problem of finding a bed for the child but lead to long-term problems over the span of the case.

If social workers are not able to find a placement for the child within hours, they will have to personally spend the night in the office or a hotel with the child. This need has not been common in Idaho; however, the shortage of available foster homes in other states shows the potential for a problem to turn into a crisis.

Child and Family Services is aware of the need to increase the number of available placements for children and youth in care by improving recruitment and retention of foster parents and has made multiple efforts to improve recruitment and retention. The efforts are laudable but have been primarily focused on training and recruitment and have not been able to sufficiently address the shortage of foster parents.

Although recruitment is important for improvement, retention is a better solution to the problem. Currently, foster parents are quitting at nearly the same rate as Child and Family Services is able to recruit them. Overall, the number of licensed foster parents decreased by 88 (8 percent) from March 2014 to March 2016.

We found that inconsistent supports and services for foster parents, a lack of understanding of the wants and needs of foster parents, and underdeveloped relationships with foster parents affect foster parents' satisfaction with their experience, their effectiveness, and their willingness to continue being foster parents.

Social workers need to have well-developed relationships with foster parents to bridge a gap that has formed by the difference in experience, training, and expectations of foster parents and social workers. The gap can lead to disagreements and leave social workers feeling frustrated or attacked and foster parents feeling disappointed, marginalized, and uninformed. Child and Family Services is attempting to improve relationships with foster parents, but it struggles with communication and investing the necessary time.

Recommendation

To improve the recruitment and especially the retention of foster parents, we recommend that Child and Family Services continue its recruitment efforts but also explore opportunities to strengthen its recruitment plan. The plan can be strengthened by determining the number of licensed foster parents needed by region and further specifying what additional resources are necessary to recruit those foster parents.

Given the costs and limited effectiveness of recruitment, we recommend Child and Family Services develop a robust foster parent retention plan. The plan should include strategies for improving the consistency of supports provided to foster parents, communication with foster parents, and the quality of relationships developed between social workers and foster parents.



CASAs are court-appointed special advocates for children who have been allegedly maltreated.

Workload challenges

Without question the most common theme we found in our evaluation was the perception that social workers do not have enough time to serve their cases effectively. About 87 percent of Child and Family Services staff agree that problems often arise because they do not have the time necessary to do the job. We also heard this concern from foster parents, court-appointed special advocates (CASA) volunteers, judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys.

In 2007 Child and Family Services conducted a workload analysis that found the need for 36 percent more staff. Since then, Child and Family Services has been able to increase case carrying staff by about 10 percent.

Our survey of staff found that, on average, program managers, supervisors, and social workers believe that social workers are carrying approximately 38 percent more cases than they can effectively serve. Similarly, Child and Family Services' most recent analysis of average monthly caseloads showed 13.5 cases per month per worker, approximately 28 percent more cases than program managers, supervisors, and social workers believe social workers are able to carry while serving every case effectively.

We found that the most significant consequences of excessive workload, or even the perception of excessive workload, are compromised performance and a persistent expectation gap within Child and Family Services.

Research consistently shows that manageable caseloads and workloads are essential for child welfare to achieve its intended outcomes. Unmanageable workloads negatively affect workers' ability to meet practice requirements, engage families, deliver quality services, and achieve positive outcomes for children and families.

One chief of social work we interviewed expressed the consequence well:

“ Because of resource constraints, social workers have to settle for C-grade work. The problem is that there is an expectation for A-grade results.

A judge echoed this perspective:

“ I believe that most health and welfare workers want to do a good job and are good people. I also believe that their case loads are too big and their resources are too small. Because they are overwhelmed, they are only capable of doing an average job. I’d give them a grade of a “C” if I were a teacher. But there is ample room for them to be improved.

Social workers’ performance is challenged by significant competing demands on their time. Social workers are faced with situations where they must choose between activities they believe to be of the highest importance knowing that they will fall short of measured expectations. When social workers make decisions about priority, what they choose may not align with managerial priorities or expectations, which compromises the program’s managerial control.

Workload is a critical factor in Child and Family Services’ performance and should be approached as a high priority. Additional staff are likely necessary to improve caseloads, but alone, adding staff will not be sufficient to address Child and Family Services’ workload challenges. Workload should be addressed by examining processes, expectations, documentation, technology, and other requirements for opportunities to improve efficiency.

Recommendation

Child and Family Services is aware of the need to retain staff and has been making efforts to address turnover. For example, Child and Family Services created a career ladder for social workers. The career ladder was intended to differentiate entry-level, professional, and expert social workers and help retain social workers by rewarding veteran staff with opportunities for advancement.

Retention is a challenging task with no simple solution. Given the importance of retention for managing workloads, we recommend that Child and Family Services continue with its retention efforts but take advantage of the systems approach we propose in chapter 5 to seek out and implement solutions to stabilize the workforce and improve retention.





Recommendation

Child and Family Services should identify staffing shortages and develop a plan for addressing those shortages. To avoid a deterioration of effort over time, Child and Family Services should work with the Legislature to develop a multiyear plan for ensuring staffing levels are sufficient to manage workloads.

Any plan for workload management should consider the qualifications and competencies of the worker, case status, and case complexity. Having enough staff to carry workloads is necessary but not sufficient for program performance. Therefore, the staffing-level plan should also account for other efforts to manage workloads, such as enhanced work processes and supports and improved work effectiveness.



Recommendation

In addition to streamlining internal processes, we recommend that Child and Family Services continue working with partners and stakeholders to explore opportunities for enhancing external processes.

For example, in response to inefficiencies because of uncertainty around court hearing times, Child and Family Services, in cooperation with the courts, developed a pilot project to allow video conferencing in hearings for social workers. Video conferencing allows social workers to continue working while waiting for hearings to begin.

By identifying and taking advantage of additional opportunities to improve and facilitate interactions and processes with partners and stakeholders, Child and Family Services can reduce workloads, expedite processes, and improve timeliness.

Organizational culture

Research has shown organizational culture of child welfare agencies to be an important factor in staff turnover, adoption of new practices, service quality, and youth outcomes.

Child and Family Services' culture is characterized by its commitment to and focus on children and families. In our survey of Child and Family Services staff, 94 percent said they believe all staff are committed to improving the situation for children and

families in their caseloads. This commitment was also apparent to us through our interviews and open comments in our survey. We also found that the Child and Family Services' team approach is in line with industry practice. We believe the team approach will serve as a greater strength to the program as the culture of accountability is improved.

The organizational culture of Child and Family Services can also be described as a culture of compromise with a conflicted sense of efficacy in the face of difficult demands and limited resources and strained relationships with stakeholders and partners.

Conflicted sense of efficacy

There is a permeating belief among staff that more is demanded of them than they can do. Because of this belief, each aspect of the organizational culture is undercut by a need to address the constant feeling of crisis. The ongoing feeling of crisis influences staff behavior and has contributed to the condition of several areas of organizational culture that need to be improved. When explaining what had most affected confidence in Child and Family Services, one chief of social work summarized the perception among staff well:

“ [My] confidence is improved by proactive efforts to enhance best practice in Idaho; [but] tempered by a lack of realistic expectations for workers in the field. All the best practices won't matter if the workforce can't implement them due to workload issues.

The belief that workers cannot consistently meet requirements and quality expectations has led to a culture of compromise in which poor performance is explainable, excusable, and expected; a condition that critically undermines meaningful accountability. We are not under the impression that anyone within Child and Family Services is happy about the condition. However, the condition has become an intrinsic reality that is an ongoing struggle to address.

Strained relationships

Another of the difficulties that Child and Family Services faces in its relationship with stakeholders and partners is differing perspectives on the purpose of and expectation for the program. For example, we found in our survey substantial and meaningful

differences in how various partners emphasize aspects of the role of the child welfare system.

The differences in perspective are expected and are not necessarily harmful. However, the expectations of each group and the lens through which they judge decisions, actions, and outcomes is heavily influenced by which aspects of the system they emphasize. The variations in expectations can lead to difficult situations and, at times, strained relationships between Child and Family Services and its partners.

Strained relationships with stakeholders and partners also stem from a culture of defensiveness or guardedness. Staff often expressed to us a belief that the program and their actions are under constant scrutiny and criticism.

A chief of social work expressed the situation well:

“ It is hard to feel like you are always being scrutinized or criticized from every angle. The workers here feel like they are constantly having to defend themselves to everyone.

Recommendation

We recommend that Child and Family Services begin an ongoing assessment of its organizational culture and take steps to remedy problematic aspects. Although organizational culture can be difficult to change, resolving deep-seated beliefs and values that are unproductive or even counterproductive is essential for Child and Family Services' long-term success.

In particular, Child and Family Services should focus on improving consistency in its beliefs, values, and practices for management, accountability, and its approach for conducting business. Child and Family Services should also ensure consistent commitment among staff to understanding and responding to the wants and needs of partners and stakeholders.

Before significant progress can be made in any of these areas, Child and Family Services must address staff's conflicted sense of efficacy and constant sense of crisis driven by the gap between expectations and practice.

If necessary, Child and Family Services should seek independent, external assistance in identifying and addressing organizational culture challenges.



Systems approach

Child welfare is a complex arrangement of systems, agencies, community partners, and stakeholders that span jurisdictions and disciplines. Any change in an individual part of a system affects the context of the systems, and any change to the context of the systems affects the parts and function of each system.

Cooperation, coordination, and collaboration are critical for an interrelated and interdependent system such as child welfare to function well. Systems also rely on individual and shared accountability. The individual parts of the system, such as organizations or stakeholders, can be held individually accountable for their responsibilities. However, individual accountability alone results in diffused accountability for outcomes that depend on the performance of multiple parts of the system. A flexible and robust governance or oversight structure is essential for effectively supporting shared accountability for system-level outcomes.

Child and Family Services has multiple layers of external feedback and accountability that monitor performance, including federal accountability, judicial accountability, guardians ad litem, and the citizen review panel (Keeping Children Safe).

The child welfare system also has developed a number of collaborative efforts, including the workforce recruitment and retention panel, statewide stakeholder meetings, the Idaho Supreme Court Child Protection Committee, the Idaho Foster Youth Advisory Board, the Governor's Children at Risk Task Force, and the newly established Child Welfare Executive Steering Committee.

Despite collaboration and multiple forms of accountability, Idaho's child welfare system lacks system-wide accountability and oversight for child welfare outcomes. Most of the existing forms of accountability generally focus on the performance of Child and Family Services.

Idaho has no system-level accountability or oversight for child welfare outcomes. Its systems framework lacks an integrated and cross-program monitoring and evaluation approach to assess the effectiveness of all systems involved in addressing risk factors and supporting families. The lack of system-level accountability results in unclear, isolated, fragmented, or diffused responsibility for outcomes and improvements.

Lack of system-level accountability is not unique to Idaho. In 2012 the federal Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities was established by the Protect Our Kids Act of 2012, which passed with bipartisan support. The commission's final report was released in March 2016. The report included a chapter on accountability of child welfare systems with the following finding:

Congress has historically found that leadership and accountability for reducing child abuse and neglect must extend beyond child protective services (CPS) agencies at the federal, state, and local levels, and the Commission believes this applies similarly to reducing fatalities. There must be an integrated and cross-program monitoring and evaluation approach that assesses the effectiveness of all systems involved in addressing risk factors and supporting families. Such an approach would recognize that outcomes for children and families are the product of multiple programs, supports, and community circumstances, not of discrete programs or services delivered to families in isolation.

Collaboration and feedback loops have resulted in (1) Child and Family Services making efforts to improve procedures and practices and (2) other partners improving various aspects of the system. However, a lack of visibility and accessibility to all stakeholders and the public is a major shortcoming of existing collaboration efforts. Stakeholders and the public may not be able to identify the multitude of collaborative groups. Even more challenging, they may not be able to find a way to provide input to the collaborative groups.

The inaccessibility and lack of visibility of the various groups can contribute to a feeling that stakeholders are being excluded from the system or the belief that the child welfare system is not transparent or that it deliberately excludes input.

The bottom line to this discussion is that Idaho's child welfare system has started to take a systems approach to child welfare but lacks visibility, accessibility, and system-wide oversight.

Recommendation

To provide system oversight, address system-level gaps, and address ongoing child welfare challenges, we recommend the formation of a formal, system-wide oversight entity with authority to ensure ongoing accountability, visibility, and accessibility for all child welfare partners and stakeholders.

One way that states have established system-wide oversight is through special legislative committees. Many states have established legislative standing committees dedicated to child welfare, children, or families. Any one of those states could function as a model for Idaho.

The structure, authority, and function of such committees varies from state to state. Most are given responsibility for providing system-wide oversight, guidance, support, and accountability while providing a forum for multidisciplinary and multijurisdictional discussion and decision making.

If the Legislature decides to establish such a committee, the committee would be able to build upon the hard work already being done in the child welfare system and complement and enhance existing collaborative efforts. The Child Welfare Executive Steering Committee recently established by Child and Family Services could potentially function as designated council to the oversight committee.

The collaboration between a legislative standing committee and the executive steering committee could also be a means of tackling large interjurisdictional initiatives at a system level.

In addition to the findings and recommendations we have presented within this report, throughout our evaluation we identified at least three areas that were beyond our evaluation scope but may merit attention at a system level.

Community resources and services

Families involved in child welfare cases are required to complete case plans before being reunified with their children. Case plans generally specify services for parents and children to complete. These types of services could include education and training for parents, health and medical, respite, or substance abuse assessment and treatment. In our interviews with Child and Family Services staff and our surveys of judges, CASAs, and Child and Family Services staff, we heard considerable concern about



the availability and accessibility of appropriate services for families and children.

CASA program

Through our surveys we found significantly differing perspectives as to whether CASAs are seen as effective sources of accountability for Child and Family Services activities.

Approximately 77 percent of CASAs believe they are effective sources of accountability, whereas 41 percent of foster parents and 26 percent of Child and Family Services staff agree. Our survey results do not necessarily indicate problems within the CASA program; however, the widely differing perspectives indicate that the program is an area that could benefit from additional study.

Preventive measures

Most preventive programs in Idaho are not administered or overseen by Child and Family Services and require various state and community partners to work together. We were asked to identify preventive child protection options. Appendix E has the results of our efforts and explains evidence-based options that Idaho could consider implementing.

