

New York Public Welfare Association

A Policy Framework for

Ensuring Child Safety

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Introduction

Ensuring child safety is a community responsibility. Government agencies cannot do it alone. Even if we had more money, added staff and better technology it can never be enough. Fortunately, it does not need to be; not if the community embraces their role, in concert with child welfare agencies, in keeping children safe.

Community engagement and exemplary casework practice are both crucial to safeguarding children.

The New York Public Welfare Association (NYPWA) represents New York State's 58 local departments of social services. Our members are dedicated to improving the quality and effectiveness of social welfare policy so that it is accountable to taxpayers and protective of vulnerable people.

The NYPWA hosted a session at our conference on July 18, 2006 to bring together national, state and local leaders to discuss child welfare policy.

Our featured speaker was Susan Notkin, Director, The Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare of the Center for Study of Social Policy (www.ccpcw.org). She was introduced by Fran Lanigan, Commissioner, Oswego County DSS. Panelists included Paul Brady, Commissioner, Schoharie County DSS, Larry Brown, Executive Deputy Commissioner, NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), Sheila Poole, Commissioner, Albany County Children, Youth & Families and James Purcell, Executive Director, Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies. Mary McCarthy, Director, Social Work Education Consortium, University at Albany, served as moderator. All commissioners of local departments of social services were invited to attend and a majority chose to participate.

This paper reflects the highlights of the presentation as well as child welfare policy issues that were generated from the discussions. The recommendations reflect a general perspective of local departments of social services rather than that of any individual participant in the conference session.

Community Partnerships

"Keeping Children Safe is Everybody's Business"

Susan Notkin presented a key purpose of The Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare which is to promote a culture of shared responsibility for the protection and safety of children on a national, state and local level. This approach recognizes that keeping children safe is everybody's business and that community members must be offered opportunities to help vulnerable families and shape the services provided.

Notkin spoke to the current state of child welfare and the direction the field might pursue in the next decade. She noted that social change to the support system for children requires coordination between goals, needs, ideas, opportunities and a sense of urgency. Advocates, policy makers, front-line workers, as well as families are discovering both deficits and opportunities in the system and are beginning to demand changes. Today's clients and public welfare leaders are realizing that a more concerted, comprehensive approach is needed to address the complexity of family issues to assure children are safe from abuse and neglect and that families are strengthened in order to care for their children.

Rather than one dominant model or approach, there is a need and a growing movement across the country to link public child welfare systems with the communities where the children live in order to strive toward the goal of safety for children. The child welfare system's outcomes nationwide are falling short of the public's expectations.

Observations:

- Too many children are not getting the help they need from the system
- Too many children are growing up in congregate care centers
- Too many children are leaving the system without learning the skills to survive or succeed
- The systems are too often operating in isolation from each other (mental health, substance abuse, etc.)
- There are a disproportionate number of children of racial minorities in the system
- The relationship between the child welfare system and communities is less than ideal

Despite the multiple forces in play in the child welfare system, focus should be placed on the things that lie within our reach. Improvements can be made to the child welfare service delivery system and the concept of community child welfare holds promise.

The core beliefs of community child welfare are that:

- With the right supports, children can remain in their homes
- If it is necessary to remove children from their homes, they can be cared for by relatives or families in the community
- Appropriate families can be found for all children
- Communities can step up to the plate (even poor communities) and partner with systems on behalf of the children and their families
- Child safety must become everyone's concern – government agencies alone cannot protect children – it must happen in partnership with the community

The community oriented approach to child welfare is based on the premise that children do best when raised by families and that children will be safer, families will be healthier and communities will be stronger if community partnerships are developed.

Susan Notkin ended her presentation with her vision for the future of child welfare which included:

- The potential that teaming can bring to the system
- Improving the community's view of child welfare
- Enhancing caseworker job satisfaction and retention
- Improving job clarity for workers, which translates into a better community image of child welfare services
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- The use of true, durable community partnerships
- Exploring different financing strategies for child welfare

NYPWA Policy Framework for Ensuring Child Safety

Session participants shared their inspirations, perceptions and expertise in generating a policy framework for ensuring child safety by creating community linkages and cultivating quality casework.

Community Engagement

Community partnerships require ongoing nurturing. Positive relationships with school districts, law enforcement, medical providers, housing agencies, churches, extended families and other service organizations can go a long way.

The public needs to understand that one unfortunate change in life circumstances can bring someone close to them into the child welfare system. Child protective services cannot do the job alone and it is only through engaging communities and partners that there will be a shift in sharing of responsibilities.

Even when we are able to intervene earlier and with more services, there will continue to be times when safeguarding children will require removal from their home to live with relatives, foster families or adoptive parents. Finding a new, permanent loving home for children who cannot safely return to their family of origin, is also a success story.

Recommendations

- Reinforce the belief within the community that most children can stay home with the right supports
- Maximize possibilities for children who are removed from their primary family to be cared for by extended families or by others within their own communities
- Utilize parent advocacy training and engage families as full partners in their child's future
- Redirect caseworkers so that they engage with children and families in new ways, such as, service planning with families, setting up offices in neighborhoods, assigning cases to teams not individuals, empowering families to improve family outcomes, and using trained facilitators at critical points in the child placement process
- Focus on neighborhood based foster care, to allow for education at the same school and increasing the odds that the first placement is both the best placement and the last placement
- Address the relationship between child abuse and poverty and acknowledge the stresses of poverty and lack of adequate housing by

integrating child welfare systems with income support systems and by linking families with training, jobs and asset development

- Track repeat report families and find better ways to meet their needs. Move the focus off the immediate problem and identify the surrounding issues
- Develop strategies that address the interplay between domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, poverty and housing; use a cross systems approach so that we integrate three or four systems for a single family
- Pursue research that will help inform decision-making and develop longitudinal data across the life of the child in order to evaluate outcomes
- Acknowledge that a disproportionate percentage of children of minority races are in the system and develop strategies to address this issue
- Challenge preventive services providers to assess their practices to ensure counties are funding programs that are supporting community partnerships, developing family strengths and assisting families in keeping their children in safe homes and neighborhoods

Cultivate Exemplary Casework

High quality, effective casework is essential to ensuring child safety. Each caseworker interacts with the child, the family and other professionals while rigorously documenting every action taken. Workers are simultaneously criticized for being too lenient in leaving kids with their troubled families and too harsh in moving other kids into foster care. Public perception is often that caseworkers have much greater authority than the law allows them in dealing with child abuse. In addition, state and federal administrative mandates and computer tasks create pressures on staff who become overwhelmed with the requirements that keep them away from spending time with the families who need their help.

Increased demands are tough on workers; turnover is tough on families.

As we look to the future, the next ten years are an opportunity to gradually build new leaders in our workforce in response to an anticipated mass exodus of staff due to retirements. Front-line supervisors will need to be made ready to shape the role of their staff and take on higher administrative responsibilities. There is a core group of champion workers in every local social services district. It is crucial to identify them, train them as supervisors and maintain their proficiency as workers. Champions build champions.

The scope and role of supervisors in the child welfare system is evolving to ensure that there is sufficient support and guidance. Just as worker turnover is

a challenge among front-line staff, retirements will reduce the level of experienced supervisors in the system. The span of supervisory caseloads may change if teaming is utilized and their role may focus more on mentoring and coaching in the future.

Overall, solutions to current workforce challenges might be addressed through new staffing configurations, elevated training and updated job titles and functions, new supervisory roles and realistic caseload ratios.

Recommendations

- Support policies that maximize caseworker contacts with families
- Provide adequate and stable funding to ensure sufficient staffing levels
- Match any new state mandates for staff qualifications, caseload size or technology requirements with the funding support to bring goals to fruition
- Enact legislation that would increase the effectiveness of child protective services by providing greater investigative authority
- Pursue systems simplification that supports family contact above all else. Computerizing processes is only meaningful if workers can spend quality time out in the field
- Train front-line staff to empower families in their own neighborhoods during service planning and encourage them to strengthen their own relationships with schools and community agencies so that family development is approached in the child's own neighborhood
- Update civil service provisions to more constructively drive hiring practices so that the workforce represents and understands the value of community-oriented child welfare
- Use new approaches to address the workforce challenges and stabilize the workforce, such as out-basing positions in neighborhoods, teaming, cross systems services, and training on job clarity and family interaction
- Pursue workload studies so future assumptions about staffing needs and workforce costs can be based upon accurate data
- Convey systems changes and principles consistently to front-line workers
- Support innovation rather than rely on one model or approach

Fiscal Considerations

Child welfare funding has been volatile during the past decade. In 1995, \$95 million in state funds were withdrawn from the system. Subsequent upward adjustments, including funding preventive services at a 65% state, 35% local cost-sharing formula encouraged reinvestments. Then in the 2004-05 state budget, child welfare lost \$122 million in Title XX funding. With each loss of state funding, counties maintained a critical focus on mandated child protective services while preventive services declined and caseloads increased.

Today, child welfare services are staying afloat through the infusion of federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds. Child welfare rests in a precarious position due to its current dependence on support from TANF dollars as other funding streams, such as, Title XX and IV-E have lagged behind. TANF funds currently allocated for child welfare will begin migrating to employment activities in order to avoid stiff federal penalties for not meeting temporary assistance work participation rates. This will leave a glaring deficit in child welfare funding which will need to be addressed in the state budget.

The OCFS is currently exploring a new Medicaid waiver that may fund some services in the future. However, our state currently has an Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) Medicaid waiver which should be immediately amended to serve foster care children with these disabilities even if alternative waivers are pursued by the state. OMRDD's neglect of this population discriminates against the most disadvantaged children in the system. In addition, the Office of Mental Health waiver serves only a very small number of the children in foster care with mental illness and should be expanded.

Implications for Future Policy Directions

Strides to ensure child safety have been strengthened by federal and state laws in the past decade. The Adoption and Safe Families Act was enacted to convey a sense of urgency in child welfare services to ensure safety and a permanent placement for children. New York State passed "Permanency Legislation" to further pursue these goals.

As state and federal policies continue to evolve the value of community engagement and exemplary casework practice in safeguarding children from maltreatment should be recognized and supported. While social services must compete for limited resources, public policy should recognize the vulnerability of children at-risk of abuse or neglect.

The state's commitment to ensuring child safety should guide state laws and budget decisions in the coming year.