

Children's Voice

VOLUME 16, NO. 4

CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE OF AMERICA

JULY/AUGUST 2007

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Child Welfare & TEC

AND

For child welfare agencies in the digital age, technology is only as revolutionary as the plan that drives it.

When Arlene King goes on a case visit, she brings experience, compassion, and a handheld device that rivals James Bond's. Her pocket-sized PDA (personal data assistant) lets her take notes and photographs, record interviews, and file forms electronically. Using a voice recognition program, she has her conversations with clients automatically transcribed and downloaded into her case files.

Like the handhelds used by rental car companies and overnight delivery services, the customized computer, standard issue to King and her colleagues, helps her agency capture the most accurate, up-to-the-minute data possible. With reliable information, her agency can identify existing services gaps, comply with federal reporting requirements, and make the case for additional state funding.

Most important, King's child welfare agency is already linked to all other human service agencies in the county. Interagency data sharing means the children and families on her caseload are more likely to receive the full range of services they need, when they need them.

Sound too good to be true? In this case, it is. Arlene and her agency are fictional, but law enforcement officers, health care providers, and businesses worldwide are already using this kind of technology, and it's making organizations more efficient and improving the lives of workers and their clients. Despite rapid technological advances, however, many of these innovations have not yet made their way to the nation's child welfare agencies.

According to a recent Annie E. Casey Foundation report, federal, state, and local agencies have spent more than \$2.8 billion on child welfare technologies over the past 10 years, with little measurable effect on the lives of vulnerable children and

families. A 2003 General Accounting Office report found that "despite efforts to implement comprehensive information systems [in child welfare], several factors affected states' ability to collect reliable data," including inaccurate data entry, insufficient caseworker training, disparities between state and federal data requirements, and lack of federal guidance on implementing reliable systems.

Allegheny County Data Warehouse: Improving Decision Making Across Agencies

More jurisdictions nationwide are recognizing the value of collecting and using data across all social service agencies. This coordination allows agencies to consolidate information, eliminate duplication, and most important, achieve better outcomes for the children and families they serve. A promising example of this coordinated approach to service delivery is the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Delivery Warehouse (DHSDW) in Pittsburgh.

Created in partnership with the private sector, local universities, and other community stakeholders, DHSDW is a central repository of 15 million client records, 17 internal sources, and 8 outside sources. Using unique identifiers, the data warehouse matches information with DHS-contracted providers and programs to understand and coordinate services. The data can be analyzed to produce aggregate or group information and client-specific, provider-specific, or program-specific reports. Authorized DHS staff can also use the data to identify and coordinate services for consumers served by multiple program offices.

DHSDW has become a significant community resource, encouraging partnerships and research projects with RAND, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the U.S. Department of Justice. With community support, DHS has implemented a public website with up-to-date information on DHS services and other community resources.

Allegheny County DHS soon will roll out a department-wide master client registration system to allow immediate updates and real-time reporting from the data warehouse.

—Marc Cherna, Director, Allegheny County Department of Human Services

Progress has been made in integrating technology at the federal level and in specific jurisdictions, but child welfare still lags behind business and other social service fields in harnessing information technology (IT) solutions that improve day-to-day decision making, optimize case plans, and maximize children's safety and stability.

Even for states awash in data, appropriate expertise or strategic guidance is not always available so it can be used most effectively for improving outcomes for children and families. In many states, child welfare agencies can be data rich and knowledge poor.

Technology

By Mary Bissell and Jennifer Miller

Leveraging Cutting-Edge Technologies

With generous support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Stewards of Change, a new organization dedicated to cross-sector innovation in the child welfare field, and the Yale School of Management brought together a dynamic team of business, technology, and child welfare leaders to explore more effective ways to apply emerging IT to child welfare management and practice. During a conference in New Haven, Connecticut, last year, Stewards of Change leaders and conference participants identified several guiding principles to drive technological and strategic change in child welfare and beyond.

Participants confirmed what child welfare leaders are already learning: Technology, no matter how transformative, is not a panacea for the complex challenges facing today's child protection system. Responding to unpredictable human behavior in the most difficult circumstances, child welfare leaders have been able to integrate technology effectively only when they are able to craft and implement a strong strategic vision to shape the agency's overall philosophy, operations, and practice.

A successful blueprint requires the entire agency, from senior administrators to frontline caseworkers, to understand and support the mission. "Agencies need a strategic business plan to drive the technology, not the other way around," explains Daniel Stein, a former corporate marketing executive and cofounder of Stewards of Change. "Technology can be a powerful tool, but it's only one of many that successful child welfare leaders are using to create and sustain change."

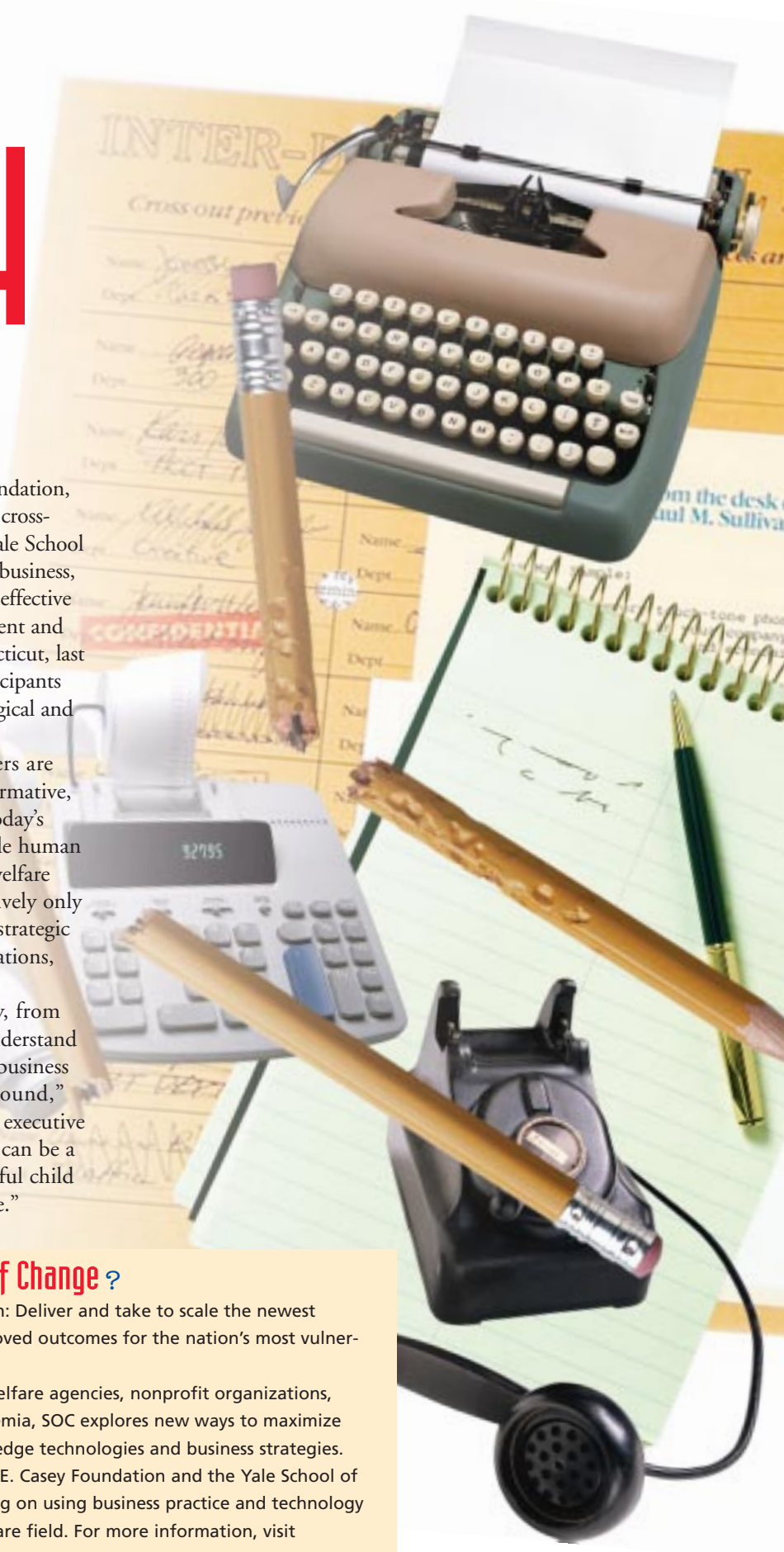
What Is Stewards of Change?

Stewards of Change (SOC) is a business with a social mission: Deliver and take to scale the newest cross-sector innovations to help child welfare achieve improved outcomes for the nation's most vulnerable children and families.

Working closely with entrepreneurs from public child welfare agencies, nonprofit organizations, business and technology industries, foundations, and academia, SOC explores new ways to maximize the effectiveness of child welfare services through cutting-edge technologies and business strategies.

For the past two years, SOC has teamed with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Yale School of Management to host a multidisciplinary conference focusing on using business practice and technology to influence and support ongoing change in the child welfare field. For more information, visit www.stewardsofchange.org.

To order a copy of the technology materials from the most recent Stewards of Change conference at the Yale School of Management, e-mail Michael Smith at michael@stewardsofchange.org.





New Solutions for Old Systems

Responding to federal funding opportunities and evolving strategic priorities, 42 states and the District of Columbia have started working on planning, developing, and implementing their Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) to report on federal outcome requirements for children in care. While sporadic progress has been made to streamline and integrate child welfare agency IT systems, many states still struggle with the legacy of antiquated systems unable to satisfy multiple reporting requirements and day-to-day data needs.

“The reality is that many states are still ‘making do’ with IT systems that weren’t created with their specific needs in mind,” says Kathleen Feely, Managing Director of Casey Strategic Consulting. “As a result, many agencies are spending a lot of time and money maintaining and updating systems that were never designed for them in the first place.”

But there is good news. Dissatisfaction with current systems, along with growing federal demand for more system accountability, has led to increased reliance on “commercial off-the-shelf” (COTS) products already being used for SACWIS upgrades and, in newer systems, to improve data analysis and reporting tools. Because they are much less expensive and require less specialized maintenance than traditional government systems, COTS products, used in combination with other emerging technologies, offer a promising alternative for streamlining older systems to better meet current child welfare technology and system needs.

Interoperability: Breaking Down Social Service Silos

Another significant challenge in using technology effectively to improve child and family outcomes is the widespread “silozation” of human services technology within state governments. Different funding sources, accountability measures, and competing agency priorities can result in dozens of separate technology systems serving the very same families. Incompatible systems result in duplication, poor service delivery, and wasted taxpayer dollars.

“Most states and counties have a patchwork of agencies and IT systems that can’t talk to each other,” notes Vernon Brown, CEO of Moss Beach Homes, a child welfare service agency with 31 sites throughout California. “It doesn’t make sense for the agencies, and the lack of coordination hurts children and families.”

To remedy this problem, Stewards of Change conference participants recommended the next phase of child welfare technology innovation focus on interoperability—allowing IT systems across multiple social service agencies to share information. With the advent of relatively inexpensive “data dictionaries,” some child welfare agencies are already using these new technologies to translate information between disparate computer systems.

Strong Leadership for a Data-Driven Culture

As with all efforts to transform the child welfare system, strong leadership is essential to support a management team and work-force that understands, values, and actively integrates data into policies and practices.

In too many cases, frontline workers have little investment or confidence in collecting data because they have never had a meaningful opportunity to see its effect on their daily lives. As a result, individuals who are required to input the data on the ground level have no ownership in the process and no evidence to prove the information was worth gathering in the first place.

Child Welfare's Alphabet Soup: A Beginner's Guide to SACWIS, AFCARS, and NCANDS

Just what do all those acronyms stand for? Here's a brief overview of SACWIS, AFCARS, and NCANDS, some of the most commonly used child welfare data terms.

States receive assistance from the federal government to develop and maintain the **Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS)**. The federal government made this funding available for states to meet federal data reporting requirements. A SACWIS is a comprehensive, automated tool that supports social workers' foster care and adoption assistance case management practice.

Most states have added other functionality to their SACWIS to support child protective and family preservation services, thereby providing a unified automated tool to support most, if not all, child welfare services. States can also integrate other data management programs into SACWIS, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, emergency assistance, juvenile justice, and child care.

As a condition of federal funding, all states must provide the federal government data under the **Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS)**. The required dataset includes case-level data on all children in out-of-home care who are under placement, care, or supervision of the state child welfare agency, as well as information for all children adopted with state child welfare involvement. States must submit AFCARS data twice annually to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

The **National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS)** is a national data collection and analysis system authorized by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. Though voluntary, almost all states and the District of Columbia participate.

NCANDS has two parts: a compilation of all child abuse and neglect statistics from each reporting state, including data on all child protection reports, investigations, victims, and perpetrators; and case-level information from those child protective service agencies currently able to provide electronic child abuse and neglect records. NCANDS data are reported annually.

"Most caseworkers who spend time gathering information, don't necessarily see how it can really be used to make their jobs easier or improve the lives of their clients" explains Stewards of Change cofounder Michael Smith. "Child welfare leaders need to provide the training and tools to build a culture that shows data in action."

To create a data-driven culture, agency heads must also do what businesses have done effectively for years: invest in and empower a chief information officer (CIO)—a top-level manager responsible for shaping the agency's technology vision and overseeing its implementation at all management levels. That

means fully integrating the CIO into overall management of and strategic planning for the agency, not just to solve technical glitches or update systems.

Connecting with Courts

Like child welfare agencies, dependency courts are also running to catch up with technologies to better track cases, manage caseloads, and communicate with human service agencies more effectively.

"Too often, permanency for a child is put on hold because judges can't get basic, reliable information," says Nancy Sidote Salyers, a retired judge and Codirector of Fostering Results, a national education and outreach campaign to support foster care reform. "The information exists, but it's a matter of making it easily accessible to those who need it to make decisions. Eliminating delay with timely information always translates into better decisions."

Fully integrated technology systems ensure courts, agencies, and other social service providers are able to access immediate information on children and families to reduce the backlog of children waiting on court decisions and vital services.

Empowering Workers

In addition to data collection and analysis, cutting-edge technology must also be adapted to serve the needs and workloads of frontline administrators and caseworkers. Just as businesses have invested in customizing equipment for workers, state policymakers and child welfare workers must also receive targeted technological support so they can spend less time on paperwork and more time with children and families.

New integrated handheld technologies, Tablet PCs, web smart phones, and verification technologies are used widely and successfully in other fields with proven results but haven't made it to the frontlines of child welfare. Making these devices available not only would save caseworkers time, it would help recruit and retain young caseworkers who have grown up to expect cutting-edge technology in their homes and workplaces.

In some cases, concern about protecting the confidentiality of children and families discourages the use of new technologies that allow child welfare agencies to communicate more effectively with other social service systems and the courts. As a result, child welfare leaders and workers may not have access to accurate, real-time data to help them make better decisions on behalf of children in care.

Just as timely data is not available to workers, it's also unavailable to the public and policymakers responsible for holding agencies accountable for child and family outcomes. Political leaders considering child welfare reforms often must rely on two-year-old data when new technologies provide more capacity to share legally protected information and other sensitive data without compromising families' privacy.

Using Data to Predict and Improve Outcomes

Although many jurisdictions are using technology more effectively than ever to collect and analyze data, few are using it to help predict and change outcomes for children and families.

The business world uses "predictive analytics" to forecast consumer behavior and modify products to meet anticipated needs and challenges. Some hospitality chains, for example, analyze consumer data to predict which customers might switch hotels, then customize a promotional package to prevent their defection.

"In the same way an insurance company can predict outcomes based on hundreds or even thousands of factors," says Michael Smith of Stewards of Change, "the child welfare field can also use data points to build new models for more proactive case management."

CWLA Teams with States to Provide Data Resources

The **National Data Analysis System (NDAS)** is a free online service started in 1999 by CWLA and sponsoring states. The NDAS website, <http://ndas.cwla.org>, enables child welfare workers to access the most recent statistics on adoption, children's health, child care services, juvenile justice, out-of-home care, and other related topics.

All data can be downloaded directly to a desktop, and users can create online graphs in minutes. User-defined reports enable visitors to view data according to their specific needs. Users can also browse the State Data Trends page, providing links to state's child welfare data over a period of time. State data can also be compared against each other.

NDAS also contains hard-to-find data on agency administration, caseloads, salaries, and child welfare staff education and training. Last winter, NDAS added a kinship care section featuring information on kinship care demographics, funding, policies, and providers.

CWLA staff and consultants also offer data and technology resources through the **National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology (NRC-CWDT)**, one of several resource centers funded as a service of the Children's Bureau to assist public and tribal child welfare systems. The center, online at www.nrcpwdt.org, assists in strategies to promote the collection, quality, and use of child welfare data for policies and practices that benefit children and families. Specific services include

- assisting with data mapping, report programming, and information system design, focused on the Adoption, Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).
- assisting state, court, and tribal staff with how data are used in the Child and Family Services Review process; and
- providing onsite and regional training on data use and data management to build the capacity of child welfare programs to use child welfare data in policy, practice, management and decision making.

Predictive analytics help caseworkers determine a child's risk level, the type of services that would be most helpful to a family, and a case plan to maximize a family's chances of staying together safely.

Software Solutions

from CWLA and Children's Bureau of Southern California

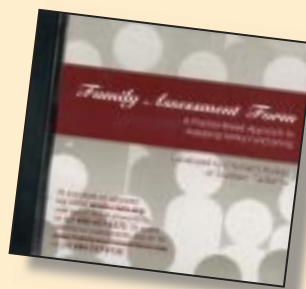
The Family Assessment Form on CD-ROM

Developed by Children's Bureau of Southern California, the Family Assessment Form (FAF) uses a nine-point rating scale to allow workers to complete a psychosocial assessment and assess families at the beginning of service, develop individualized family service plans, monitor family progress, and assess outcomes for individual families and programs.


FAF is designed as a standardized form but is adaptable for a variety of clinical, procedural, or program needs. FAF is available from CWLA in two HIPAA-compliant software applications, both on CD-ROM and usable with single-user or networked systems:

- **FAF Pro** (\$495) supports a range of case management tasks, including assessment, service planning, case notes, and termination, as well as family and program outcome and administrative reporting. Go to www.tinyurl.com/2zhfq6.
- **FAF Express** (\$295) is a shorter version designed strictly for limited data entry and reporting on family functioning only. Go to www.tinyurl.com/29xqrk.

Both the Pro and Express versions come with 50 assessments. Additional assessments, additional site licenses, and upgrading from the Express to the Pro version are available exclusively from Children's Bureau of Southern California (online at www.familyassessmentform.com, or call toll-free 888/357-9135).



Helping Child Welfare Reach It's Technology Potential

Efforts to use technology to improve outcomes for children and families at risk, both inside and outside the child welfare system, are complex, especially given the laws and regulations designed to protect private information. But just as health care providers and financial institutions have determined that the advantages of well-designed technologies outweigh their risks, the child welfare field must also continue to pursue new strategies to inject creativity and connectivity into its operating systems. 

Mary Bissell and Jennifer Miller are partners in ChildFocus, a child welfare policy consulting, research, and strategic planning firm. Learn more at www.childfocuspartners.com.