Improving Child Welfare

Starts with

Modernization

Modernization in child welfare is long overdue, as suggested by several federal policy initiatives urging for change.[1]

A unified, closed-loop referral platform represents an important step toward child welfare transformation. This solution enables better collaboration between agencies, contracted providers and community-based organizations — which will help meet the unique needs of children and families through whole-person care.

Barriers to Modernization

Child welfare agencies face a range of modernization challenges.

One of the main hurdles is limited technology and resource investment in preventive services, says Dacia Read, vice president of government and regulatory affairs at Unite Us, a software company that offers tools and platforms for improving community health and well-being.

"If there's a way to enable communities with tools so they can work together in a network model and wrap services around a family, that's where we want to see those prevention dollars going," Read says.

Research has shown that better data could improve outcomes in child protection, placement prevention and child mental health.[2] Indeed, the federal Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 requires prevention and family programs to use evidence-based services, programs and tools.[3]

But many child welfare agencies struggle to collect, analyze and use data to inform decision-making. For example, it can be difficult to link specific referrals and services to actual outcomes, which makes it hard to know which programs are driving true improvements in children's well-being.

Many child welfare processes still aren't data driven.

The Need for Networks

Gathering and integrating data is becoming even more critical as local leaders adopt a more holistic, comprehensive approach to child welfare, says Justin Brown, a senior fellow at the Center for Digital Government and the former Oklahoma secretary of human services.

"Poverty remains the single greatest reason for family involvement in the child welfare system," Brown says. "We need to address areas of need around housing, food and social services that are best delivered at the local level through not just government but also nonprofits and faith-based organizations."

Modernizing legacy systems and processes in child welfare can facilitate more effective care coordination and collaboration among governments, providers and community partners.

"One of the biggest shortfalls in the current systems, and it's the one that people need the most, is the ability to connect to external resources," Brown says.

A platform that securely facilitates closed-loop referrals — one that connects clients with the right services and resources at the right time and tracks the effectiveness of these interventions — can empower agencies to better serve children and families.

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— *Justin Brown, Senior Fellow, Center for Digital Government*

How Modernization Helps

A closed-loop referral platform, which is built using a master person index, brings different sectors together. A master person index essentially creates a unified profile, allowing an agency to better track a child's needs and services over time.

The platform fosters a more proactive, informed approach to case management and improves care coordination across providers and community partners before a child is even involved in the child welfare system.

This enhances caseworkers' ability to identify risks and connect kids to the right level and types of service at the outset. Built-in tools on a closed-loop platform make it easy for caseworkers to review data on case outcomes in one place, which can inform future program design or referral decisions.

Additionally, caseworkers can address more than one social need at a time and provide a holistic response to what an individual child or family may be experiencing.

For providers and community-based organizations, a closed-loop platform streamlines the reimbursement process and ensures the appropriate reporting information is included for federal and state bodies.

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The Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has used a closed-loop referral platform from Unite Us to support a "no wrong door" approach to its referrals, which aims to provide access to many assistance programs through any single access point.

Using the platform has allowed DCFS to leverage data to support program and service improvements, increase accountability, and inform future investments. The platform also has enabled DCFS to provide wraparound services, such as legal and housing assistance, and targeted support at a single point in time.

"This is why it matters to be able to meet people where they are," Read says. "It's really helpful to have a more holistic model to support families."

Supporting Families Through Technology

Caseworkers, administrators, providers and community-based organizations work tirelessly every day to keep children and families safe and improve their well-being.

As dedicated as they are to this mission, their work could have even greater impact if they were empowered with the right tools, resources and technologies. Changes at the federal level are creating a favorable funding environment and framework for child welfare agencies to modernize effectively, so agencies must seize this opportunity to adopt platforms that offer advanced capabilities beyond traditional case management and reporting.

A closed-loop referral platform offers the modern capabilities agencies need to proactively pair children and families with comprehensive services and make sure progress is made.

1. https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/about/cb-priorities/family-first-prevention
2. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6221194/
3. https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/practice-improvement/evidence/ebp/?

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