

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

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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- Scores of paper reports existed – mostly outdated – but there was little capacity to collect and verify, analyze and communicate critical, accurate and usable data to the field or to key stakeholders.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 led 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.

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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.