

Background Briefing New York City Fire Department

Reforming Child Welfare in New York City
Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta
Former Commissioner ACS (Administration for Children's Services)

I. Problem Addressed:

The Child Welfare Administration in New York City was a dysfunctional system. In many cases, adoptions and reunions were not happening in a timely manner. No program was in place to ensure that siblings would be kept together when possible. The use of computer-generated information accessible to all employees was virtually nonexistent. The system, in short, was failing.

II. Program Solution:

In January 1996, the Child Welfare Administration was abolished and the Administration for Children's Services—the first free-standing agency in New York City history devoted to the protection and well-being of children—was created by Executive Order. Nicholas Scoppetta was named Commissioner of ACS.

III. Implementation Challenges:

The overhaul of child welfare in New York City required:

- imposing on the Administration for Children's Services a dynamic system of management accountability and cultural change that, with the agency properly restructured and supported, protected children who came to the agency's attention and assured the well-being of children who came into its care;
- galvanizing the City—including residents, neighborhoods, houses of worship, and community-based organizations—to discover and report instances of child abuse and neglect, and to become partners in the drive to make certain that every child is safe and has a loving and supportive home; and
- engaging organizations and government entities interested in the welfare of children to create a simplified, coordinated, child-focused system that will protect all the children of New York.

IV. Strategy:

A. Description:

A new Accountability Review process was implemented for cases of abuse and neglect where there was an indication of internal mismanagement. ACS operations were reviewed and the facilities were toured. Meetings were held with experts in the child-welfare field in New York and across the country.

Commissioner Scoppetta also began the process of separating ACS from its parent agency and building an infrastructure of budget, technology, procurement, and personnel management capabilities. In April of 1996, he directed that a Cultural Diagnostic (organizational assessment) be performed to identify the organization's assets and the obstacles it faced in becoming highly effective; that Supervisory Conferences examining randomly selected cases be conducted with all those accountable for good case practice; and that a reengineering team comprised of internal and external experts should propose a new mission, structure, and organizational systems for the agency. In July 1996, he appointed a new management team to direct the transformation of his agency.

B. Advantages of Strategic Choices:

Many front-line workers in the field offices care deeply about the children they are struggling to protect. These same workers took pride in overcoming great and persistent obstacles, including the lack of basic supplies, the hostility of many they visit, and the onerous reporting requirements of the State and Federal governments.

C. Implicit Trade-offs:

At the same time, there were numerous and deeply rooted cultural obstacles to transforming ACS into a results-focused, high-performance organization. Bitterness and cynicism, borne of years of being whipsawed between competing mandates and missions and the waxing and waning of serious managerial attention, were widespread. Through most of the prior 25 years, there had not been a consistent mission focus or measurement system for assessing success. The overall poor quality of basic organizational systems gave workers the sense that even their best efforts were ultimately futile.

V. Lessons Learned:

In order for substantive change to occur in a government organization, there are three critical factors that must be present: political will, substantive expertise, and time. In the case of ACS, those three elements were essential to the overall success of the reform effort.