

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES:

A Guide to Modernizing Child Welfare Practices and Technology

There are more than 437,000 children in foster care¹ and more than 60,000 children in congregate care² in the U.S. Even though states spend roughly \$28 billion annually on child welfare services,³ many are struggling to keep up with the recent influx of children into the system, asking for more foster families and bigger budgets to address growing caseloads. On top of this, legacy child welfare systems can make caseworkers' jobs even more challenging and prevent them from spending time serving families.

The situation may look grim, but there's hope to reverse this trajectory. Federal funds are available to help states transition from outdated legacy systems to a Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS). At the same time, legislation passed by Congress last year — the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) — aims to shift federal dollars to prevention and early intervention, so children can safely stay with their parents and not enter the foster care system.



CCWIS and FFPSA present an enormous opportunity for child welfare innovation. Both could spur new approaches to child welfare practices and technologies that enable better outcomes for families and children. Together, these changes will empower agencies to use the most important tool at their disposal — dedicated caseworkers who can produce better results.

“Before Family First, caseworkers were showing up in family homes with only one intervention,” says Molly Tierney, North America senior manager for health & public sector at Accenture. “Now they can show up with a wider array of interventions. They’ll be able to provide ample services for a family who is struggling without having to remove their child from the home to do it.”

CURRENT CHALLENGES IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Caseworkers must investigate multiple reports of child abuse and neglect every day, on top of filing paperwork about child visits and reunification and placement decisions. Unfortunately, the systems that support these efforts often aren’t up to the task.

“A lot of state agencies still use systems that were built in the late 1980s or early 1990s. These systems were built with antiquated technology and in a way that is inflexible to change. They are also often siloed, so they are only focused on one program and one program alone. This makes the caseworker user experience cumbersome,” says Sumant Anand, vice president of government sales at Vlocity, a company that provides cloud-based health and human services (HHS) applications built on the Salesforce platform.

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Old systems tend to have common shortcomings. First, many of them don’t integrate data across the HHS ecosystem, preventing caseworkers from getting a 360-degree view of a child or family’s engagement with various social services programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

These systems also were typically designed to ingest data, not to give it back to caseworkers to support decision-making. On top of that, it’s often difficult to add innovative capabilities like artificial intelligence (AI) onto these systems to provide insights on when to remove a child from a home, place a child in foster care, or reunify a child with his or her family.

SPOTLIGHT ON CHILD WELFARE

437,000

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Beyond technology struggles, child welfare agencies face significant practice challenges. The use of evidence-based program models within child welfare is still nascent.⁴ There often isn’t robust research on effective strategies to achieve desired outcomes, such as the best treatment models to address common mental health issues facing child welfare-involved youth. Using evidence-based practices in combination with caseworkers’ clinical judgment and practice-based knowledge can help agencies move toward the prevention and early intervention model FFPSA calls for, but this will require organizational and cultural changes.

Shifting to preventive services and reducing congregate care requires child welfare agencies to change long-standing practices. Most agency resources have been focused on intervening after abuse or neglect has occurred. Agencies will need to redirect these resources to focus on well-designed, parent-centered programs or home visits to prevent more children from entering the foster care system in the first place.

Child welfare agencies rightfully have focused on protecting children, but this can leave children in residential treatment facilities, group homes and other non-family settings for extended periods — potentially resulting in adverse consequences. Currently, 14 percent of children in foster care are placed in congregate care.⁵ Determining how to safely reduce the use of this practice model, when appropriate, and transitioning to better permanency planning and more family placements will be critical as agencies try to maximize federal funding.

CCWIS AND FFPSA: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

CCWIS and FFPSA will help agencies address their practice and technology challenges.

In June 2016, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) issued The Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) rule, replacing the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) rule.

Through the new CCWIS rule, the federal government provides 50 percent matching funds for agencies to transition to modern case management systems that facilitate interoperability and

modularity, where components and innovative technologies can be easily layered to extend their capabilities.

CCWIS sparked transformation in child welfare because it encourages innovation and the use of modern technology configured for each state's needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. It also places greater emphasis on data quality and requires data exchange with other programs and systems.

FFPSA followed nearly two years later. In July 2018, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released its first guidance on the new law. FFPSA creates a new focus for agencies by making prevention a federally fundable set of activities, supporting evidence-based practices as the preferred method of intervening with families and prioritizing family placements over congregate care.

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Val Armbrust, North America Managing Director of Child Services, Accenture

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REINVENTING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

Today, most child welfare agencies are ill-prepared to transform their practice in the way Family First demands. Agencies must undergo several changes: experiential changes to deliver workflows through intuitive interfaces that increase caseworker efficiency, technical changes to harness system intelligence to improve prioritization and identify relevant services, and cultural changes to provide better support to families and caseworkers.⁶

As it relates to system modernization specifically, agencies must establish their technology vision before the RFP process and understand the deployment methodology — whether it’s agile, hyper-agile or waterfall — that best suits their business needs. It also helps to enlist the help of a vendor that can serve as a strategic partner in the technology implementation.

The following technology capabilities can help support the modernization process:

CONFIGURABILITY: Agencies should take advantage of API-based technologies to quickly launch new capabilities. Look

for systems that are scalable, modular and configurable, rather than highly customized systems that will be difficult to maintain and upgrade.

“Enabling technology will go a very long way in addressing a lot of challenges agencies face, because it allows caseworkers to do what they’ve really been hired to do — spend more time with children and families — and that ultimately will have a huge impact on outcomes for families and for the child,” Anand says.

A modular, API-based approach “allows agencies to be nimble around how they utilize external systems, and integrate with their existing legacy applications,” says Anna Corley, child welfare platform lead at Accenture. With APIs, functionality can be integrated to implement in a modular, flexible way.

A CLOUD-BASED PLATFORM APPROACH: Cloud-based platforms will enable agencies to move faster and more efficiently toward coordinated, human-centered, outcome-based service delivery where the child and family are at the center.

The cloud eliminates the need for agencies to procure, deploy and support large-scale IT infrastructure as they modernize key systems. Agencies also should consider solutions that encompass a multi-tenant cloud architecture. This approach lets them share IT resources more cost-effectively to meet different business needs and makes it easier for the entire organization to take advantage of new features as they are deployed.

INTEGRATION WITH CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGIES: Disruptive technologies like AI and predictive analytics can enable better decision-making. Putting cohort data — such as school dental records — into an AI engine could allow agencies to spot linkages between children who don’t get regular dental checkups and incidences of likely neglect or abuse, for example. This insight could help agencies address potential incidences of abuse and neglect before they happen.

“We can use analytics and data to understand what families need before something awful occurs,” Tierney says. “That’s better for kids, better for families, better for communities and better for the state budget.”

Virtual or extended reality (VR/ER) can also make an impact. For example, it typically takes years to develop the skills caseworkers need to effectively engage, observe, decide and interpret signs of safety and risk. With VR, immersive storytelling and interactive voice-based scenarios eradicate risk and dramatically increase the speed at which caseworkers develop data-gathering and decision-making skills.

ROBUST, FLEXIBLE PRACTICE MODELS: The right system will encompass an extensive child welfare case management model for different scenarios caseworkers may face in their

day-to-day work, enabling an integrated approach to case planning that will:

- ✓ **Allow caseworkers to make reliable safety decisions**
- ✓ **Enable decisions and actions that reduce the time a child spends in foster care**
- ✓ **Provide insights that keep more children safely at home with their families**

DYNAMIC WORKFLOWS: Look for a system that offers intuitive workflows; a streamlined approval, submission and documentation process; and mobile capabilities that let caseworkers operate more efficiently in the field. This will permit caseworkers to redirect time previously spent on administrative tasks to high-value work with children and families.

360-DEGREE VIEW OF THE HHS ECOSYSTEM: Agencies can implement a platform that has a central repository for caseworkers to see graphical representations and comprehensive views of each of their cases. This enables caseworkers to match a family or child's needs to available services across the HHS ecosystem.

“Technology can really speed up the pace at which caseworkers become seasoned decision-makers and that’s what states and organizations really need,” Tierney says.

CONCLUSION

Child welfare agencies dedicate themselves to protecting children and bringing permanency into their lives. Unfortunately, technology and practice challenges impede agencies from making an even bigger difference in the lives of the constituents they serve. CCWIS and FFPSA can change this. This legislation and increased federal funding can help agencies shift their practice and modernize their systems, giving them valuable insights that improve outcomes for children and families.

“Child welfare is buried in the measurement of process — did somebody write it down? Did we get that report done on time? It’s not that those things aren’t important, but you can do all of that and not know if you’re having the intended impact on children,” Tierney says. “With CCWIS, Family First and all of the modern technology we can bring to bear on practice, we have the opportunity to deliver wildly different results for families and kids who are struggling in this country.”

This piece was developed and written by the Governing Institute Content Studio, with information and input from Salesforce, Accenture and Vlocity.

Endnotes:

1. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/foster.pdf#page=1&view=Introduction>, pg. 3
2. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cbcongregatecare_brief.pdf (see PDF pg. 2 — “Proportionately, children in congregate care comprised 18 percent of the foster care population in 2004 and 14 percent in 2013 — a notable decrease.”)
3. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/an-introduction-to-child-welfare-funding-and-how-states-use-it-3>
4. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/practice-improvement/evidence/ebp/>
5. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cbcongregatecare_brief.pdf
6. Governing Webinar: Taking a Fresh Look at Child Welfare Systems to Accelerate Child Safety and Enhance Outcomes, www.governing.com/events/webinars/Taking-a-Fresh-Look-at-Child-Welfare-Systems-to-Accelerate-Child-Safety-and-Enhance-Outcomes-102598.html

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