



POLICY

Extending Innovation

The time is ripe to refocus national priorities, says the Child Welfare League, and ensure that every child thrives in a safe, loving and stable environment.

By Christine James-Brown

THE CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE of America is a membership organization for public and private sector providers, advocates, trainers, educators and funders that are focused on addressing the needs of our most vulnerable children, youth and families. To advance its goal of improving outcomes for these clients as well as their caregivers and communities, CWLA supports innovation in child welfare services through influencing public policy, defining and promoting best practices, and providing education, information and training for the field.

Over the years, CWLA has been at the forefront of helping our members implement new and innovative services, programs and practices on issues such as better serving immigrant families; addressing the needs of gay, lesbian and transgender youth; responding to the growth in kinship care; engaging families and youth in decision-making about their services; and using technology to enhance service delivery.

CWLA shares Stewards of Change's long-term vision of a connected health and human services system that is child-centered, comprehensive, holistic and accountable as the best means of improving outcomes for all children, youth and families and especially the most vulnerable populations. This requires that, as a nation, we encourage and support innovations in the service delivery system and bring them to scale for public benefit.

The reality is that it is not difficult to find new strategies, programs and services in the child welfare and broader human services system. There are plenty of examples of innovation throughout the United States. The challenge is taking proven innovations to scale quickly while maintaining the integrity of the efforts and making sure they have an equally positive impact on as many children, youth and families as possible. Going from a focus on the programs and projects du jour to transformation in the way services are organized and delivered is critical.

This is a time of opportunity we cannot afford to miss. The current economic crisis, especially the drastic reduction in government finances, has created a willingness to do things that would not be tackled in more comfortable times. The economic crisis offers a silver lining that, when handled carefully, provides a chance for innovation to flourish and for new partnerships to form and old ones to evolve. Many who have been overwhelmed by the complexity of child welfare are embracing the idea of working a new, more streamlined way, viewing it as a statement of hope that we can meet the challenge of achieving improved outcomes for our most vulnerable populations.

This will require service delivery organizations to develop a clear understanding of how to measure the differences that specific innovations make in the lives of children, families and communities. For-profit companies use



the bottom line as their yardstick in measuring the success of the innovations they implement. It is more difficult for the human services sector to clearly articulate how it will measure the success of its innovations. Ultimately, innovation is about allocating time and resources to things that work. We need improved evaluation models and more research about what work is required for the field to be able to define clear outcomes and understand and implement the strategies, programs and services that will advance these outcomes.

The technical connectivity, data exchange and other infrastructure improvements required to enable diverse systems and organizations to work together are a significant challenge, but the focus on electronic records in the healthcare system is likely to impact all systems and ease the situation. The nontechnical aspects of interoperability are an even greater challenge, however. Finances and incentives that support service integration; protocols, practices and processes that reinforce integration; shared vision, accountabilities and desired outcomes are all critical to enable the diverse systems required to serve vulnerable children and families to work together.

In this context, innovation applied and advanced comes from different sectors working together toward common goals while sharing ideas and information in an atmosphere of accountability, respect and trust. In the history of child welfare, caring for children and supporting families was left largely to faith-based community and charities. With the establishment of the Children's Bureau in 1912 (see page 35 for a timeline of the U.S. child welfare system), the government took on the job of child welfare, and private efforts through less formalized relationships diminished. Many states and counties have formed contractual relationships with private providers, but the relationships are often largely prescriptive and highly focused on contract administration.

Now and moving into the future, true innova-

tion requires strong partnerships between the public and private for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. Discussions and perspectives must grow beyond those of vendor and buyer. Bringing innovation into the child welfare sector also requires the ability to harness the creativity, compassion and resources in children and youth, families and communities. It's important to acknowledge that the system that expects these most vulnerable consumers to be open to sharing and receiving information, respectful of the roles and responsibilities of everyone "at the table" and laser-focused on working together toward improved outcomes does not often engage in a parallel process.

No one sector has the resources and knowledge to address today's social issues alone. We must use all of our combined creativity and technology in a way that encourages partnership and strategic communication—we must learn and share what is working, and what is not, holistically. This is true at the level of direct work with children, youth and families and at the macro level across systems and sectors.

Change to embrace proven innovation is never easy, and it is especially difficult for the child welfare system. In addition to the inertia and bureaucracy that are characteristic of most human services systems, child welfare must deal with limited resources, high-profile coverage and intense public scrutiny of what is typically portrayed as system failures and rapid turnover in staff at all levels, making system innovation extremely challenging. Leadership, courage, an asset-based view of children and families, and the belief in positive possibilities within the child welfare system are essential from employees at all levels and sectors for innovation to be embraced and sustained.

Leaders in a position to influence the future will need to look beyond the day-to-day challenges, refuse to concern themselves with who gets credit for what new idea and how information sharing might threaten their "turf,"



and maintain a mission-focused, long-term view of what is in the best interest of children, youth and families. We can at times agree to disagree, respectfully, and keep moving forward in partnership. In a field that hears all too often what is not going well or what we are not able to do, let's support each other in focusing on what we can do, and partner with one another in a way that creates the optimal environment for success. The children and families deserve nothing less.

In the years ahead, and with even greater vigor in this time of challenge and opportunity, CWLA will leverage its role as standard setter

for effective practices to serve children and youth, its convener role, the fact that its membership base includes a diverse mix of public and private organizations, and the insights and knowledge it has gathered in its role as administrator of the National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology to work with Stewards of Change and other partners to advance the vision of a connected, client-centered, outcomes-focused child welfare system.

Christine James-Brown (cjamesbrown@cwla.org) is president and CEO of the Child Welfare League of America.