Supporting Children and Families: A Child-Welfare Perspective

This section provided as an excerpt of the larger publication available at copp.asu.edu
Phoenix-area families are facing multiple challenges posed by the changing economic, social, and political environment of the early 21st century. While many families have the resources to cope—including extended families, faith communities, employment, quality schools, health care, recreation, and adequate housing—many do not. These needy families—often confronting multiple problems and limited resources—are served primarily by Child Protective Services (CPS), an agency in the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES), and a host of nonprofit organizations that actually deliver the counseling, child care, drug treatment, and health care. CPS faces its own formidable array of obstacles to providing quality services to these troubled families. As Phoenix’s population grows and becomes more diverse, these obstacles will increase proportionally. If, by 2012, CPS and its nonprofit allies are going to provide the highest level of service to these needy families, strong leadership, extensive collaboration, and significant changes will be required.

The Context

CPS, which is charged with ensuring the safety of Arizona’s children, is one of nine divisions of DES. The ability of large organizations like DES to quickly respond to new mandates is strained by their very size, complexity, and need for accountability. Still, CPS has been remarkably responsive to changing political and social landscapes. It may be useful to look at CPS’ operations via the topics of intake, placement, and resources.

Intake

In the six-month period from April 1, 2006, through September 30, 2006, the Department received 16,781 reports of alleged maltreatment. This translates to a staggering 33,000-plus reports a year. The majority of reports originate in Maricopa County. As Figure 1 illustrates, neglect is the most frequent reason for a referral to CPS—which is consistent with national trends.

Definitions of neglect are difficult to operationalize when considering the role poverty plays in the ability of parents to meet the welfare needs of their children. Food insufficiency, health insurance, quality daycare, and lack of safe housing or any housing at all are often a reflection of parental income. Working utilities, access to reliable transportation for health appointments, and adequate clothing for the weather are also directly related to income.

Poor parents face the loss of their children when their income inhibits their ability to provide the basic necessities of life. The role of poverty in child welfare cannot be understated and has been a concern since the First White House Conference on Children in 1909.
The substantiation rate for the entire state varies by time period but overall stands at a mere 7%. At the same time, the intake function of CPS consumes significant resources. It seems that many reports contain insufficient evidence to justify further intrusion into a family, or are intentionally false. Nationally, policy makers have been reluctant to look into whether the costly process of investigating so many reports in which a child is not in danger should change so that more resources could be directed to families that need services.

**Placement**

CPS supervised more than 9,000 children who were in out-of-home care during this six-month period. Most (75%) have spent an average of 24 months or less in care, and the average number of placements was 3.18. For the 25% of children who have spent 24 or more months in care, the risk of placement changes increase. Multiple placements can prevent a youth from establishing enduring attachments to adults and other youth. Placement changes can involve changes in schools, resulting in educational disruption. Health and mental-health care providers may change with each new placement and connections with religious institutions or social activities may also be disrupted. Child welfare agencies strive to minimize the emotional, psychological and social costs of multiple placements.

As Figure 2 illustrates, preschool age children are most likely to be in care, and adolescents account for 31% of the population. While the law defines anyone under the age of 18 as a minor, the needs of these two groups differ significantly. Very young children are at the greatest risk of death or serious injury at the hands of their caretakers due to their heightened vulnerability. Adolescents are less at risk of death at the hands of a parent or caretaker, but their risks in other categories are high. Motor vehicle accidents, suicide, and homicide become genuine threats. Ensuring the physical safety of young children is of paramount importance, while helping adolescents to develop safe behavior practices is also important.

**Figure 3** displays the racial/ethnic composition of substitute care in Arizona. One noteworthy aspect of this data is that African American children, who comprise about 3% of the state’s total child population, are placed at a rate that is quadruple that rate. To understand this complex issue, the child welfare community will need to identify the factors encouraging the placement of African American children and the impediments to finding them permanent homes either through adoption or reunification.

Indeed, preliminary research suggests that black children are at risk at every stage in the CPS process. The prevalence of poverty raises the risk of allegations of neglect. Black children are more likely to be placed in substitute care and to stay there for longer periods of time, and are less likely to be adopted than non-black children. Countering these imbalances—by such measures as training providers to recognize the subtle role of race as well as social class in the assessment of neglect—will take a commitment on the part of all stakeholders, the allocation of resources, and leadership.

**Figure 4** illustrates the case goal of placed children. These numbers are consistent with national trends. **Figure 5** illustrates where youth are placed. Arizona uses relatives as a source of placement for children; while this is considered to be a sound child welfare practice, it has financial implications: The federal funding formula for place-
ment supports foster homes over the home of relatives. Therefore, state dollars have to be used to cover the costs of placement with relatives. This is a disincentive for the states and can unintentionally discourage the use of relatives or caretakers who cannot meet licensing requirements. The federal government pays about two-thirds of the cost of child welfare services in Arizona through a variety of programs such as Titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act and the Social Services Block Grant. 2

There are substantial differences in the amount DES pays foster parents. Licensed foster parents receive about $840 a month to care for a child. Relatives caring for a child may be eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding for that child. TANF is heavily federally funded. A TANF grant to care for a related child is about $204 per month. An additional child would receive another $73. Not all relatives are eligible for TANF funding. Unrelated caretakers and ineligible relatives must be paid with state dollars. For an adolescent, the amount is $52 per month. Thus, caring for two adolescent siblings would cost $1,680 in licensed foster care, $277 in the home of a federally eligible relative, and $104 in unlicensed care. To help families, CPS and family advocates need to address the federal funding formula and look to the state for a commitment to children. The federal government does not appear to be willing or able to be responsive and meet the needs of families in the states. State government may well have to take the lead and provide for innovative programs to help families.

Resources

Starting July 1, 2003, CPS began investigating all calls to the child abuse hotline. This accounts for the large increase in the number of investigations, which now exceed 36,000 per year. By 2012 we are likely to see even more children referred to the hotline. The task of investigating all of these reports—most of which will be unsubstantiated—will require the hiring of more investigators. Since the department has had great difficulty hiring and retaining line staff to meet today’s needs, the future may bring even more critical staffing issues.

A consequence of investigating all reports to the hotline has been an increase in the number of children entering substitute care. The number of children in out-of-home care increased by 36% between March of 2003 and March of 2005. This required the department to significantly increase the number of foster or group homes. CPS has worked diligently and now has in excess of 3,200 licensed foster homes. More homes are being recruited than are being lost—a balance that will need to continue for the department to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of children who will enter care by 2012.

CPS recognizes the importance of regular contact between case managers and foster care providers, children, and parents. It is sound child welfare practice for the case principals to meet regularly, usually monthly, to ensure that all parties are moving toward the same goals. However, such monthly meetings require a staff of sufficient size. As the numbers of children and foster homes increase, the number of case managers needs to increase. Again, CPS has had continuing challenges in recruiting and retaining case managers. The goals of child safety and family well-being cannot be met by agencies that are chronically understaffed.

CPS requires staff to have monthly visits with foster care providers, a requirement that has been difficult to achieve. In fact, from April 2006 through September 2006, 45% of foster care providers did not receive the required visitation. CPS staff is required to visit children in out-of-home care monthly; for this same reporting period, almost one-third of the children did not receive this visit. The department points out that the number of visits may be inaccurate since staff may not have entered current information into the CPS data management system.

The Choice: More of the Same, or Something New?

The need for services will not diminish and is likely to increase. New problems confront families and seem to become more difficult with each decade. For example, cocaine and methamphetamine are particularly destructive to family life. Easy answers to this problem simply do not exist. Agencies are still trying to develop effective and efficient drug treatment programs appropriate for the wide range of drug abusers. The type of drug may change with the decades, but what remains relatively constant is the fact that millions of Americans are abusing drugs. 3

The child welfare community is thus faced with a choice about how to meet future needs. First, it can choose to do more of what it is already doing. This is the easiest course.

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More staff, more foster homes, and more community-based services may help to meet expanding needs. Reform efforts have become more intense and focused since 2003. There are a number of reports outlining challenges and solutions to these many problems. These reports have suggested numerous practical changes, including:

- Purchasing car seats for case managers transporting infants and toddlers
- Buying cell phones for staff making visits in dangerous situations
- Co-locating CPS staff with behavioral health, domestic violence and law enforcement personnel
- Requiring CPS to partner with national organizations on neighborhood services to strengthen families

Building upon the current foundation is an acceptable course of action, since much of what is currently being done may actually be effective for some families. But while funding for CPS has increased in the last few years, the funding has not matched the needs.

The second choice would require the child welfare community to be bolder and to try new strategies. This is the riskier course. It requires fundamental shifts in conventional thinking and a redistribution of resources. Three broad areas where opportunities for new thinking may exist are intake, personnel, and community partnerships.

**Intake**

The substantiation rate presents a particularly difficult policy issue. Single-digit substantiation rates represent a significant waste of resources. Arguments abound as to why rates are so low, both in Arizona and nationally. It may be, for example, that many cases may not fit the current standards for evidence in court. However, even assuming it’s true that many more families could be substantiated—and thus that the “true” substantiation rate is four or five times the current rate—more than half of reports would still be unsubstantiated. Other states are exploring this issue. Some are concluding that, if child abuse is a crime, then those with expertise in criminal investigation should be handling allegations of maltreatment. Florida has recently moved child abuse investigations into the sheriff’s office in some counties, while CPS continues to investigate in other counties. Arizona should watch these initiatives and evaluate their utility.

Knowing that making a false child-abuse report is a crime, yet it is exceedingly difficult to find cases in which someone was prosecuted. Custody disputes, family conflicts, or trouble with landlords can result in the misuse of CPS, and there are no real consequences. And while it’s reasonable to argue that false reports should be investigated, doing so may take time from a child who truly needs CPS intervention. This is another public policy question in need of discussion.

No one will ever be able to predict with 100% certainty that any specific child will be abused. Ordering that all cases of alleged maltreatment be investigated is an over-reaction and wastes valuable resources. We do know which children are at the greatest risk of harm, and we should be concentrating our finite resources on those children. To continue to try to investigate every report dooms the agency to a state of permanent struggle just to keep up with current demands.

**Personnel**

Staffing is such a critical issue that, until it is addressed, CPS will not be able to adequately serve vulnerable families. In the 2007 semi-annual report, DES identified staffing as a challenge in meeting safety and permanency goals: “The Department continues to struggle with an inexperienced workforce that is unable to deal with the complex issues present in the child welfare system.”

This is the same struggle faced by the rest of the country. At any one time, CPS can have hundreds of vacancies. There are many costs to this high turnover rate. The financial costs are easy to calculate: Training investigators or case managers costs thousands of dollars and takes weeks if not months. The non-financial costs are harder to calculate: Families cannot wait for replacement staff. Court reports, referrals for services, and mandatory monthly visits are among the tasks that must be assumed by other unit staff who already carry full workloads. Morale can suffer as the remaining staff cope and families suffer from a lack of continuity. Replacement staff need time to become familiar with families’ unique circumstances, but families under CPS supervision are often under tight time lines for completing services. Failure to meet deadlines can result in the permanent breakup of the family.

The frequent loss of experienced staff forces the department to constantly recruit replacements. This can result in recruiting new staff with limited backgrounds in human services. Public child welfare work requires a high level of education and skill,
and the Master of Social Work (MSW) is the best-prepared professional. But because recruiting MSWs and bilingual MSWs is difficult, applicants with other degrees are recruited to fill the vacancies. These applicants may need more extensive as well as more frequent training.

The negative aspects of public child welfare work are well documented. The work is difficult, dangerous, unappreciated, and poorly paid. Examining why staff stay or leave could help DES design a more supportive work environment. Research indicates that supervisors play a key role in employee retention, as does flexibility in job assignments, manageable workloads, and reasonable documentation requirements. DES can address these factors: It can support supervisors and introduce more flexibility in job assignments. But workloads will not become manageable until the department can lower the turnover rate.

Excessive documentation requirements are a symptom of an oppressive work environment. CPS staff jokingly describe their agency as run by forms. Indeed, when there is an incident such as a child fatality, staff anticipate that administration will soon issue new forms. This is not an effective strategy: Forms consume an inordinate amount of time and offer the false hope that problems will not occur if staff fill out the right paperwork. Educated and experienced staff view additional forms as a burden, a limitation on their ability to allocate their time, and a symbol of administrative distance and distrust. For all these reasons, excessive documentation contributes to an adversarial work environment. But excessive documentation is one of the easily resolvable problems in child welfare. By listening to staff, more effective methods of documenting accountability can be established. By 2012 there could be fewer forms.

Community Partners

Partnerships between CPS and the community offer many opportunities to better serve Arizona families. The problems faced by CPS are mirrored in the private child welfare community. Private agencies are also seeking culturally competent, bilingual, educated, and professional staff, and frequently experience an even higher turnover rate than public agencies. For example, the Child Welfare League of America (2003) reported an average turnover rate of 39%. All of this means that a public/private partnership would serve the interests of all parties. Preliminary steps in developing a meaningful partnership have begun, and need to be expanded. Both sides could combine resources and develop new strategies for recruiting, training, and retaining culturally competent and professional staff. New models of neighborhood-based service delivery could help to strengthen vulnerable families. The models can be developed and tested jointly.

In fact, the public child-welfare sector could very well collapse in total chaos without the nonprofit sector. Most of the services that actually change lives are provided by nonprofits. Without the nonprofits to provide the counseling, child care, drug treatment, and health care, families in CPS might not receive any services. By 2012, nonprofits will face the challenge of providing more services to more families—a challenge that will require both capable leadership and an increase in resources.

Both types of agencies can commit fiscal resources to ensure that staff have the skills and attitudes to deliver effective and culturally competent services. By combining some of their training components, they can achieve cost savings and enhance collaboration. Collaboration between equals would create an infrastructure to help empower families and prevent at-risk children from falling through the cracks. This sort of partnership requires the parties to recognize their unique roles, work toward supporting the success of each agency, share resources, and develop joint programs and policies. The bureaucratic barriers to a partnership between equals are considerable, but not impossible to overcome. Indeed, a task force with a clear mission on how to accomplish this partnership, high-level political sponsorship, and adequate resources could produce an action plan within six months.

The last area for expansion involves using the public university to help support children and families. There are two immediate priorities that a ASU-DES/community partnership could explore. First is enhancing staff recruitment, retention, and competency through staff training, professional education, and continuing education. The second priority is strengthening services and service delivery through program evaluation and research.
The Future

Arizona has the institutional and intellectual resources necessary to serve its needy families. What it requires is a willingness to experiment. Changing screening criteria and developing alternatives to formal CPS investigations are sound places to begin. CPS has difficulty helping families with complex problems, which means that community agencies, especially those with substance-abuse expertise, are essential. Funding nonprofits to develop, evaluate, and implement these programs requires leadership and resources. This is an opportunity for state government to step up and support families.

The need for services to help larger numbers of young families, particularly Hispanic families, will increase for the coming years. Many of these families, especially in the greater Phoenix area, will be monolingual Spanish with wage earners in the lower-income occupations. This combination will strain the current capacity of CPS as well as the larger child welfare community. Many more bilingual staff will be needed, but so far the efforts to increase capacity in this area have been meager.

By 2012, the CPS agency will face new challenges as the number of children in the Phoenix area, especially poor children, increases.10 In 2003, Governor Janet Napolitano established the Child Protective Services Reform Initiative. This initiative identified major issues facing CPS and outlined plans for responding to these issues. CPS has instituted major policy changes in an effort to respond to the concerns of the public. But while much has changed since 2003, overcoming the impediments to a more effective service system for the state’s most vulnerable citizens continues to vex the child welfare community.

Capacity building in the areas of staff and services should be a high priority. Offering fiscal incentives is a first step, but does little to increase the pool of bilingual staff. Language programs in the workplace can help current staff increase their language competence; consultants able to teach staff enough Spanish to communicate with clients need to be part of the training component. However, providing staff with the time to participate in the training may be difficult, as staff are already working at capacity and vacancy rates in units average 20%.

According to DES, there were 486 CPS case managers (out of 516 authorized positions) in Maricopa County at the end of 2007. Their average monthly caseloads—12 investigations, 19 out-of-home cases, or 23 in-home cases—exceeded department standards of 10 investigations, 16 out-of-home children or 19 in-home cases. DES officials said that in order to achieve department caseload standards statewide, 206 additional case managers would have to be hired, about half of them to work in Maricopa County. The Governor’s Office has proposed a three-year plan to attain that staffing level beginning in July 2008.

Committed professionals in public and private child welfare agencies, in state and local governments, and in the educational community should pool their considerable resources and respond proactively to the uncertainties and challenges facing families. Failure to provide this leadership and develop innovative and comprehensive programs will mean a much bleaker future for vulnerable children in the Phoenix area. Many more children, especially minority children, will enter care, remain for protracted periods, and have difficulty finding a permanent home where they can develop lifelong relationships. The consequences of such a dismal future will affect us all.

Nora Gustavsson, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work. Her areas of research include child welfare and disenfranchised populations.

NOTES

1 DES (2006) published a report that provides a statistical picture of the enormity of its role. The information can be accessed online. This level of transparency serves the agency well and enables the public to see just how much work their tax-supported bureaucracy is doing.


3 For a full discussion of this issue, please see the chapter by Flavio Marsiglia, Tanya Nieri, and David Becerra.


9 For a discussion of the role and impact of nonprofits, please see the chapter by Robert Ashcroft.

10 For a detailed discussion of the challenges poverty presents to the state and to Phoenix in particular, please see the chapter by Elizabeth Segal.

REFERENCES


