

Can Child Protective Services Agencies Be Reformed?

An Interview with Dee Wilson, MSW

Dee Wilson, MSW, is Executive Director of Northwest Institute for Children and Families at the University of Washington School of Social Services. He began his career with Child Protective Services (CPS), Division of Children and Family Services, Department of Social and Health Services in 1978 as a social worker in Spokane. During his career with the Children's Administration he has been a supervisor, an area administrator and from 1997- 2004, served as Regional Administrator of Region 6, Division of Child and Family Services, Department of Social & Health Services.

Q: What problems have you seen with past efforts to reform Child Protective Services agencies?

DW: When legislators become involved in reform efforts, they usually pass laws addressing some salient points, often in reference to some high-profile child deaths. Then the Children's Administration follows up with policies that provide for increased regulation. This brings in an additional level of structure, very frequently in the assessment process.

This is what happened in Washington State with Kids Come First - 1. I worked with a group of very capable people on the internal committee that planned that particular initiative. Somehow we just couldn't get away from the thought that we needed a more structured assessment process. We already had a risk assessment tool that we had used for a long time, but the committee added a safety assessment, a safety plan, a reunification tool, and another case-planning tool at the back end of the system as well. We added five new assessment tools to the agency.

That particular initiative was a striking example of a general trend. We all had reservations about what we did, but we couldn't stop ourselves because it was the kind of thing that the agency does. It was in line with expectations. This is what I see happen over and over again—the thought that you can fix things with laws and policies and then hold people accountable—and that approach rarely works.

Q: How have these increased levels of regulation affected the system in Washington State?

DW: In Washington State, the whole reform effort has been the product of pressures from all sides, both internal and external, including the federal government, the Braam Settlement, COA accreditation, various laws that have been passed, the pressures of advocates, the Governor's insistence that the agency meet performance targets. All these pressures combined have led to a situation where expectations and resources are

so out of line that it's pushed the whole system into a crisis mode. The problem is not so much that caseloads have gone up, although they have gone up in places. The problem is that expectations have gone up. A number of elements in the current system, both within the agency and outside it, are producing a greatly increased level of external demands.

The situation that currently exists is just not sustainable. It would be an understatement to say that morale is bad within CA. There's a hopelessness among staff, a sense that the people responsible for administering and funding the agency will never understand their predicament. No one has recognized that it's necessary to bring expectations into an alignment with resources so that there's at least a chance that staff can meet the expectations that are outlined for them in law and policy.

Q: What alternatives to increased regulation might be more effective?

DW: The reforms that have occurred really are aimed at the most inexperienced staff because those are the employees who are increasingly staffing CPS units. It amazes me that I rarely hear conversations where someone steps back and says, "Well, maybe there's a way to retain more of the experienced people who are doing critical jobs at the front end of the system." We need people who have the specialized knowledge that tends to go with experience, particularly knowledge of substance abuse, mental health and domestic violence. We need people who have the experience of applying that knowledge to a CPS child welfare environment and have skills in working with chronic families.

At the federal level, the Children's Bureau, to its credit, organized a conference last year on caseworker recruitment and retention in Washington, D.C. It was one of the first of its kind. They brought in more than 200 people from around the country. That's the level of attention that it's going to take over a long period of time to overcome the idea that there's some way around the need for experience in child welfare, especially in CPS. There isn't any way around it.

Q: How can the gap between resources and expectations be effectively reduced?

DW: I think that people at the top administrative levels and in the legislature have heard for years that the agency is under-resourced. They get tired of listening to that because it's a constant refrain. On the other hand, being smart sensible people, they understand that with super-comprehensive reform plans like Kids Come First- 2 and the Braam Settlement demands have transcended what the system can do. But the legislature tends to want to go at it gradually. The Governor has proposed a package of 197 social workers, which is probably about one half to two thirds of what's needed. And that proposal doesn't include the clerical, supervisory and managerial positions

that are needed to effectively utilize the new casework positions.

People who are in the policy-making roles now can understand that the agency needs more staff. What they don't get is that OFM and the legislature need to adopt a principle that we are forever-after going to match up expectations and demands so that we don't have these periodic crises. There needs to be a commitment to making an ongoing effort to understand what it would take to staff the system adequately. As long as that is lacking, the state system will just continue to lurch from crisis to crisis. Decision makers aren't dealing with the underlying dynamic.

A couple of the smaller states have started to deal with it. In Delaware, I think they passed a law that once caseloads reach a certain level the state has to bring on extra caseworkers. They also have a pool of workers that can go into vacancies on an as-needed basis. I sometimes hear people say "Well, we can't just throw money at the problem," or "why throw good money after bad?" but some facets of the system can be fixed by making a commitment to adequate staffing.

On the other hand, money is just one part of the picture. It's possible to invest money and still get a bad result. Part of the problem is resources, but there's also a thinking problem. The wrong kinds of questions are being asked. Until the agency begins to think a little deeper about its problems and needs, then any kind of reform or solution is going to be a temporary one.

Q: What other aspects of the system need to be examined in greater depth?

DW: For one thing, public welfare agencies need to develop far better measures of outcomes for their CPS programs. This is something that can actually be done without spending a huge amount of money. We're operating on an impressionistic basis. When there are bad cases, there's a presumption that those bad cases reflect practice in general. How does one even know really? And more recently the states have accepted the federal government measure of child safety, which is very inadequate. It's not worthless, but it's just not anywhere near adequate as a stand alone measure. If managers in the agency want to know if practice is improving, the agency really does have to have a way of measuring itself in some kind of quasi-adequate way; currently it doesn't.

There have been some very good trends in the office of Risk Management within the Children's Administration. Sharon Gilbert, Sharon Ham, Tony Sebastian and Tom Stokes have produced very good studies in recent years that compare some of the high-profile fatality cases instead of looking at each case in isolation. I think that is a step forward in understanding what's going wrong in the handling of a lot of these cases. They have been looking for patterns in child deaths as opposed to looking at each one on an individual basis.

This brings us back to the fact that this step was possible because there were four

very qualified, experienced and committed people working on it. It's not hard to understand the need to have professional veteran staff at the front end of the system, but it's very rarely discussed and, to my knowledge, no strategy for achieving this goal has been proposed within CA and DSHS or considered in the legislature.

Measurement is a difficult thing. You have to work at it over a period of time. It's just something that people learn how to do better. This is the kind of thinking that's needed. Without it, any kind of reform is going to have short term effects. The favored solutions to the issues we're facing are not the ones that are going to work. A lot more in-depth thinking is needed to produce lasting improvements in the entire system.