Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

A Conversation About Innovation within Philadelphia's Child Welfare System

Family & Community Health

Date Posted:

Dec 02, 2019



The City of Philadelphia's Department of Human Services (DHS) is leading the way in how the child welfare system evaluates services provided to children and families. This year, our PolicyLab team is collaborating with DHS and Casey Family Programs to redesign the evaluation processes for foster care provider agencies and the city's new Family Empowerment Centers. This innovative redesign aims to build quality metrics into annual evaluations alongside traditional measures of compliance dictated by state and local regulations. Measuring aspects of quality within foster care and prevention will allow individual agencies and the system as a whole to engage in continuous quality improvement aimed at enhancing services for children and families.

As we wrapped up National Family Caregivers Month in November, we sat down with Michelle Hacker, MSS, LSW, from DHS Performance Management and Technology division to discuss the goals for our collaboration.

Can you briefly describe DHS' role and mission for children and caregivers?

We are the child welfare and juvenile justice agency for Philadelphia. We are laser focused on preventing child abuse and neglect. Our focus on prevention is the foundation of our goal to right-sizing the Philadelphia child welfare system by improving outcomes for children, youth and families. We believe that a community

neighborhood approach to service delivery will have a positive impact on child and family safety and well-being. Our vision is that fewer children become DHS involved, and that families receive services that are the best fit.

We want to support parents to safely care for their children. We understand that all caregivers need support in order to provide optimal care to children. That's one reason we invest in Parent Cafes. These are parent-led groups that happen all over the city (hot meal and childcare provided). Getting support from other caregivers has been a life-changing experience for many—starting with the fact that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. This is true no matter what your caregiver role—parent, grandparent, resource parent.

In addition to Cafes, DHS also operates the Parent Action Network, and supports a network for providers to offer parenting classes on a wide range of topics throughout the city.

When a child is removed from their home and placed in foster care, our goal is that Resource Parents adopt a "shared parenting" perspective-recognizing that they are part of a team working to get the family back together.

What prompted this innovative approach of evaluating quality in child welfare and prevention services?

We recognized that our prior evaluation tools were not capturing a complete picture of services. We needed more rigorous evaluation tools to measure quality for providers. One way we addressed this is by incorporating quality measures from best practices research. This combined with compliance evaluations comprises a more holistic picture of contracted provider performance. The new evaluation tool and process will assess compliance and quality, reflect provider practice, and provide actionable feedback.

How do you hope these data on quality will change practice and outcomes for children and caregivers?

We hope that the data will better emphasize quality measures and recognize the importance of child well-being, bioparent relationships and inter-agency communication. The updated evaluation tool will more accurately reflect the roles and responsibilities of provider agencies and measure support for Resource Parents, which is a key element of quality. Other added elements will measure internal quality improvement efforts at provider agencies to track outcomes and help tell the whole story. We also hope it informs how we can better support Resource Parents and ultimately has a positive impact on retention.

In this collaborative work looking at foster care, we have heard about the importance of engaging biological parents when possible to support quality experiences for children (and families). What is the impact of stronger biological parent relationships with foster parents and children during a foster care placement? And how can DHS (and other stakeholders) support those relationships/connections?

Stronger biological parent relationships with foster parents and children during a foster care placement can make being in placement a more positive experience for both children and families by establishing continuity of their relationships prior to entering care. It can also lead to timelier reunification and establish permanency. Family reunification is prioritized and facilitated through the support and mentoring of the family of origin by the resource parents. DHS and other stakeholders such as provider agencies can support these relationships by communicating the expectation of resource parents nurturing these bonds and training them on the best ways to do that.

What are DHS's priorities for prevention and what excites you most about the new Family Empowerment Centers?

We are acutely aware of the tremendous burdens of poverty faced by families in our city. Child welfare and poverty often intersect. And with 34.6% of Philadelphia's children living in poverty, it's not surprising that our first level of prevention is focused on very tangible things. We've enhanced our rapid resource initiative—which pays for groceries, utility bills, even furniture. We also increased funding for Community Legal Services this year so that DHS and its front-line providers can directly refer families for free legal assistance with landlord-tenant issues and help accessing benefits.

Our number one prevention priority is supporting families to live safely together. Prevention services are directly linked to our child abuse hotline to prevent families from needing court-ordered services. Family Empowerment Centers are a critical part of this strategy. They provide deeper support for parents and children. They help connect families to ongoing physical and mental health care services, help resolve parent/child conflict, as well as address any other significant concerns, such as housing.

The most exciting thing is that these strategies are working. There are 1,000 fewer children in the system now as compared to 2016.

As we conclude National Family Caregivers Month, we are appreciative of all caregivers of children in our community—biological parents, kin, and resource parents—and the systems and services that support families.

Deanna Marshall, MPH, is a former research associate at PolicyLab.

Michelle Hacker, MSS, LSW, is a director within the Department of Human Services' Division of Performance Management and Technology.

Katherine Kellom
Katherine Kellom
Administrative Manager
Meredith Matone
Meredith Matone
DrPH, MHS
Director