Utilizing Strategic Management and Planning to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes

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This article should be treated as a tool for thinking about or rethinking how strategic management and planning can be used to achieve better outcomes for the children and families serviced by social service systems. The article summarizes some of the challenges facing the field of child welfare; identifies the benefits of utilizing strategic management and planning to improve outcomes, create accountability and achieve sustainable system reform; and explores relevant research on strategic management and planning for governmental agencies and non-profit organizations.

Keywords: child welfare, strategic management and planning.

Использование стратегического управления и планирования для улучшения результатов в области благосостояния детей

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Эту статью следует рассматривать в качестве инструмента для осмысления или переосмысления того, как стратегическое управление и планирование могут быть использованы для достижения более высоких результатов в области социального обслуживания детей и семей системами социальной защиты. В статье обобщаются некоторые проблемы, стоящие перед сферой социального обеспечения и защиты детей; определяются преимущества использования стратегического управления и планирования для улучшения результатов, создания подотчетности и достижения устойчивой реформы системы; а также рассматриваются соответствующие исследования по стратегическому управлению и планированию для государственных учреждений и некоммерческих организаций.

Ключевые слова: благополучие детей, стратегическое управление и планирование.

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> *Those who cannot tell what they desire or expect,*
> *still sigh and struggle with indefinite thoughts and vast wishes*
> (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Challenges of Child Welfare Management and Practice

The child welfare system in the U.S. is complex. It includes not only public child welfare agencies (State, local and tribal), but also courts and the legal system, community and private service providers, foster and adoptive parents, many other stakeholders and, most importantly, the children and families served.

Child welfare workers are called upon every day to make difficult decisions about the children and families they serve, and these ultimately could be life-or-death decisions. All child welfare staff live with the weight of the daily decisions they make and with the fear of the scrutiny if, or when, something goes wrong. Child welfare administrators and supervisors, at all levels, manage a system that is generally under-resourced, with a young and inexperienced workforce, and with a lack of evidence-based practices and services. There are daily challenges of high caseloads, the absence of needed services, and the irrelevance of strategic planning initiatives to the day-to-day-work. Child welfare directors are expected to not just manage this system, but to "reform" it in a frequently changing and politically charged environment replete with conflicting priorities and demands.

Child welfare has gone through tremendous change. There have been cycles of national system reform — from the design of family preservation and State Automated Child Welfare Information Systems, to kinship care, systems of care, practice models, getting to outcomes and implementation frameworks. In the past 30 years, Congress has passed significant laws impacting the priorities, services and outcomes of child welfare agencies in the U.S. The incremental changes in these laws reflect the evolution of the child welfare system in terms of federal oversight, State management and program administration requirements, and expected outcomes for children and families served. Each piece of legislation focused on legitimate, systemic issues that needed attention at the time, and the sum total has increased the complexity and challenges of managing State/tribal child welfare systems as more requirements for administering programs and serving children and families have been imposed.

There has been a renewed focus on early intervention with the passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act in 2018. Well-being outcomes have been reexamined and refined, influenced by a preventive and multi-systemic approach. Child welfare agencies are adopting and adapting services to focus more on the individualized needs of families by building integrated service systems that engage families in service planning and system governance, and quality assessment. Many agencies have developed practice models that incorporate agreed upon principles and approaches that guide the agency's work, while frequently implementing evidence-based practices and evaluating child welfare practitioners to better improve intervention efficiency and effectiveness in real world settings. There is an ongoing effort to identify and adopt evidence-informed practices, strategies and interventions. Agencies are able to collect an

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enormous amount of qualitative and quantitative data and exhibit increased capacity to analyze and translate the data into information that may be used to improve management and practice.

These management and service complexities drive, at least in part, the need for strategic management and planning. Strategic management allows States and tribes to respond to the interrelated needs identified by their constituents, not by changing one system, but by directing their efforts at the system as a whole. A planning process provides a structure within which agencies can make decisions about priorities and allocation of resources. Participants can identify areas needing improvement and areas of strength in the agency and determine how resources, time, and effort will be deployed. Managers can coordinate work across units and divisions to avoid duplication and align policy and practice.

Benefits of Strategic Management and Planning

Today, we understand planning as a more inclusive, action oriented, non-linear process, undertaken by stakeholders throughout the organization. Good planning promotes a common vision to guide and anchor the organization; fosters leadership and accountability at all levels of organizations; builds organizational capacity; and facilitates partnerships within and across systems. Strategic planning provides an aerial view, a systems perspective in which each subsystem/systemic factor is viewed as part of an integrated whole. A systems framework that focuses on integration of practice, in relationship to identified outcomes, should be a constant touchstone — a source of frequent checking and validating that we are seeing, and helping others to see, the whole picture. It's a way to connect the dots.

There is also a need for strategic management. Frequently, there is a chasm between "the plan," and the context in which it is developed and implemented. So often planning becomes a parallel process disconnected from strategic priorities and identified needs. There is a need to embed planning within management and link day-to—day activities with the development of organizational capacity and outcomes for children, youth and families.

A Useful Tool

Strategic planning is now a common practice in public and non-profit organizations. The strategic planning process is an effective tool that agencies can use to facilitate system change to improve outcomes for children and families. A thoughtful and comprehensive planning process can focus the agency's vision and direction; embody and imbue agency values and principles; and foster intra- and cross-agency systems integration.

Good Professional Practice

Today, strategic planning is seen as the best practice in organizational development. The U.S. associations and organizations that have developed national standards for the management of child welfare agencies — the Child Welfare League of America, the Council on Accreditation of Services for Children and Families, and the National Association of Public Child /Welfare Administrators — all specify that agencies should develop a strategic plan.

Linking Practice to Outcomes

There is a need for social service agencies to build systems that support and improve practice to achieve better outcomes for children, youth and families. This includes a collaborative process that involves a broad range of stakeholders, the development of a shared vision and outcomes, goals, and practices, and methods to measure progress. Joint development and implementation of a strate-

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gic plan make all staff members and stakeholders more aware of the agency's purpose and overall direction. It helps ensure that everyone is working together in a concerted effort for the same purpose. When plans are strategically managed, they help caseworkers see how their day-to-day work with children and families relates to agency outcomes. A strategic plan can also help managers and supervisors at all levels see how the work they oversee helps the agency move in desired directions. The continual cycle of strategic planning allows agencies to assess, plan, implement, evaluate progress, and adapt as needs change, similar to the child and family assessments and case planning processes. A well-executed planning process offers decision makers a rare opportunity to step back and look at their organization as a whole. For those unfamiliar with the organization, a strategic plan provides a clear understanding of a vision and strategic priorities.

Legal Mandates

The planning process is also responsive to federal and State planning requirements. Federal and State requirements for planning have often been established in response to calls for greater efficiency and/or increased accountability. Federal and State legislators have increasingly required child welfare agencies to define agency goals and priorities, and/or to report regularly on outcomes. State child welfare agencies are required to develop comprehensive 5-year Child and Family Service Plans (CFSP) under Title IV-B. The Child and Family Services Review process was developed in response to a 1994 Congressional mandate to ensure compliance with State plan requirements. The review builds directly on requirements for the CFSP; elements of Program Improvement Plans (PIP) developed in response to the Child and Family Services Review process must be integrated into the CFSP.

Research Resources

There are thousands of articles, books, websites, and tools to help government agencies and non-governmental organizations develop strategic plans. Few are devoted to planning and managing implementation in child welfare. It is a field where there is little evidence-based practice. Instead, practice-based evidence, lessons learned through application, often guides improvements in management, supervision and practice.

Practitioners can look to research and scholarship for guidance. Poister, Pitts and Edwards provide a conceptual strategic planning and management model and a thorough analysis of planning and management research initiatives. Bryson offers a foundational planning approach. Fixen and Blasé examine implementation management and organizational drivers and offer ways to assess and create readiness for change. Kotter helps us understand the stages of organizational change, and Wandersman presents an accessible way to incorporate outcomes and quality assurance. The following section summarizes some of these ideas and how they may be applied to child welfare management and planning.

Strategic Management: Poister, Pitts and Edwards

In 2010, Theodore Poister, David Pitts and Lauren Hamilton Edwards published their comprehensive analysis of research on strategic planning in the public sector. After examining 34 research articles published in the major public administration journals over the past 20 years, the researchers found numerous efforts to assess and document the impact of environmental and organizational factors on strategic management. The purpose of their work was to understand which planning tools were utilized, which factors contribute to or impede effective planning, and which efforts are

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beneficial in linking strategic planning processes to outcomes. They also hoped to identify gaps in knowledge. To help them organize and understand the existing research, the authors created a conceptual model linking environmental and institutional/organizational determinants to strategic management and organizational capacity and performance improvement outcomes. The researchers defined strategic management as "…the broader process of managing an organization in a strategic manner on a continuing basis. Strategic planning is a principal element of strategic management, which also involves resource management, implementation, and control and evaluation".

Their analytical model focused on the strategic management process, namely, the plan formulation; the strategy content; and implementation of the plan. The researchers explored the impact of two types of determinants on the strategic management process and, ultimately, on outcomes.

Determinants are defined as "influencing factors." Environmental determinants are influenced by the operating environment. They are created by the concerns of constituency groups and policy advocates, as well as trends in the field. Institutional/Organizational determinants include external mandates or constraints, autonomy and structure; governmental and intergovernmental systems such as legislative or executive mandates; level of fiscal/statutory autonomy; decentralized program structure or service delivery; self-contained or networked agency size, type of governing body; value system and organizational culture; leadership and management; and analytical capacity.

Outcomes are framed as two stages — enhanced organizational capacity and longer-term changes in performance. Organizational capacity is defined both internally and externally. External capacity could include stronger partnerships and stakeholder relations, more positive public image and political support. Internal capacity includes increased management or analytic capacity, improved ability to respond effectively with rapidly changing environmental circumstances, more effective leadership, and more positive organizational culture. Performance outcomes may include improvements in quality, productivity and cost-effectiveness.

Though developed and employed as a conceptual model to review and analyze research on strategic management and planning in the public sector, the model helps us understand which efforts are effective. The authors emphasize the importance of strategic management and the need to incorporate a strategic planning process into strategic management. They emphasize the relationship of environmental and organizational factors to sustainable organizational capacity and performance improvement. They point out the need to focus on outcomes throughout all stages of strategic planning and management and the significant role of a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process that monitors activities and intermediate outcomes. Finally the authors highlight the value of an evaluation process that is designed to assess expected outputs and outcomes. Unlike other planning models, the conceptual model fully embraces the importance of strategic management and its impact on capacity, performance and culture.

Strategic Planning as a Way of Knowing and Learning: Bryson

For over thirty years, Bryson has helped public and non-profit agencies understand the theory and practice of strategic planning. Bryson defines strategic planning as "a deliberative, disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does…" It is a way of knowing and learning, and a continual process for improving organizational performance. It involves looking at where the agency wants to go, assessing the agency's current situation, and developing, implementing, and evaluating activities that move toward future goals.

Bryson helps us understand that planning is strategic when it focuses on what the agency wants to accomplish and on moving the agency incrementally toward these larger goals. By constantly fo-

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cusing attention on a shared vision and on specific goals, strategic thinking, and acting and learning, strategic planning has the potential to permeate the culture of the agency, becoming a tool for creating systemic change. Leaders at all levels — directors, managers, supervisors, and caseworkers, as well as external partners — are engaged in developing a sense of direction and identifying priorities.

Leading Change: Kotter

Kotter's process for "leading" successful organizational change is particularly well-suited to change efforts in child welfare. Built on Kurt Lewin's "foundational change model" (unfreezing—embracing the need for change; transitioning—making the change; and refreezing—allowing time to re-establish stability), Kotter provides an eight stage process: 1. Establish a sense of urgency, 2. Form a guiding coalition, 3. Create a vision, 4. Communicate the vision, 5. Empower staff to implement sustainable change, 6. Generate short-term wins, 7. Encourage additional changes and 8. Anchor new approaches in the organization. Successful change efforts must cycle through each of the stages and, because of this, generally require a great deal of time. Kotter's steps are particularly applicable to strategic management in child welfare where change initiatives involve multiple stakeholders (both internal and external); competing priorities; and multi-layered strategies.

Implementation: Fixsen, et al

The art and science of implementing innovations in social service and educational settings is now being explored and evaluated. The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) has focused on researching the stages of implementation and developed tools to help leaders assess their organization's competence and overall capacity to plan and evaluate. NIRN has defined implementation as "a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions… Implementation processes are purposeful and are described in sufficient detail such that independent observers can detect the presence and strength of the 'specified set of activities' related to implementation".

Frequently, there is a gap between "the plan" and the context in which it is developed and implemented. So often planning becomes a parallel process disconnected from strategic priorities and identified needs. There is a need to embed implementation planning within strategic management, linking day-to—day activities with the development of organizational capacity and outcomes. In some cases, leadership or management teams within an organization or system have fully explored a "change initiative" and have decided on a course of action. The same leaders and managers then are surprised when collaborators, staff, or colleagues display what some call "resistance to change". Resistance occurs when people are not ready for change, and perceptions of priorities and needs are misaligned.

Getting to Outcomes: Wandersman, et al

The Getting to Outcomes (GTO) model was developed to address the gap between prevention research and practice by building competency and capacity at the individual and program levels for effective prevention practices. The model helps us understand how communities and organizations can design, implement and evaluate practice interventions. Evaluators, working in close collaboration with program implementers, utilize a framework and tools that include process outcome evaluations. The process evaluation determines if the practice was implemented with fidelity, as intended, and the outcome evaluation determines whether the practice model achieved the intended results. This formative evaluation approach helps practitioners address issues as they occur and make strategic changes accordingly**.**

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Conclusion

The research publications referenced above and cited below provide insight into the systemic organizational challenges that hinder managers and policy makers from designing and implementing impactful social services. The resources may be useful to the many stakeholders in child welfare, as well as those in other fields, such as technical assistance providers, researchers, evaluators, and educators that think about how government and non-governmental systems may be improved to better serve children, youth and families. The publications may be best used as planning and management resource materials rather than planning and management frameworks to be adopted or rejected in their entirety.

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