







# All Aboard Toward Thriving Families

## Strategies to Keep Early Intervention and Prevention on Track

By Kelly Harder and Sean Toole

**A**s kids, we both loved trains. Watching them shipping grain out on the prairies or riding them into Grand Central Terminal was a thrill. They are engineered to manage incredible loads with their powerful engines and their rails arc gracefully across the landscape, beckoning to destinations far beyond.

Child welfare agencies, like trains, are tasked with enormous responsibility and expectations. They pull the railcars of practice and support as they chug forward on policy tracks that crisscross the child welfare landscape.



Today's child welfare train is working as hard as ever, with more weight—tasks, oversight, budget limitations, and expectations—continually being added, and its network of policy tracks becoming increasingly more complex. The positive national movement, since the passing of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) toward increased efforts on earlier intervention and prevention, to assure all kids and families can thrive, is the latest addition of railcars connecting to our agency train. Any forward motion toward this new reality where families thrive, however, could be threatened if the load—such as alternative/differential response, not placing kids out of challenging but safe homes, increased dependency on community-based in-home parental skills and other family needs, enhanced staff training around trauma, Whole Family 2-Gen, person-centered, and other approaches—is not properly accommodated.

To prevent all this exciting and important prevention work from derailing before it gets started, we must be very deliberate in our actions. To realize the benefits and desired impact that early intervention and

prevention offer, we propose the following two strategies:

## 1. Engage those you serve to reimagine your work

With the implementation of all this newly energized internal and necessary community-based prevention work on the horizon, we really are at an optimal point and time in our human services field to reimagine our work and make the changes necessary to modernize how we deliver services and meet the needs of children and families who desperately need our help.

Taking a very human-centered and intentional approach to designing the systems and solving the big problems in child welfare requires much more engagement with clients, community, and staff than we typically do. Today we pass a policy, define a practice, hoping to train and fully prepare staff, then go tell youth and families we know what will work best in their situation and lives.

Primary prevention is focused on community-based early intervention and prevention-based services and interventions. To do all we can to assure families are thriving, we must take the time to authentically understand and address whom we serve, why we serve them, and what the experience is like for all involved. This is what human-centered design is all about: developing solutions to identified issues by involving the human or consumer perspective in all steps of problem solving.

It is an ideal approach that moves us from our current, system-centric, vertical model of permission and approval-based operation built on 40-plus years of thought and knowledge, and toward a more “customer-driven” horizontal engagement. It allows you to address your system and all those involved in it, rather than focus on program by program, chasing symptoms.

With client, community, and staff input, you can establish early intervention targets such as how we can reduce the number of families that are engaged with the child welfare system. You can then develop the interaction and experience models and the needs assessments of key

stakeholders and influencers, followed by facilitated workshops to reimagine how the community might work together to achieve new and desired outcomes.

Human-centered design can be used to tackle the big challenges in our systems; it requires your commitment to engage all of the groups that need to act to support your policy and practice goal. These include:

- clients (i.e., families, and kids you serve)
- direct-line staff and supervisors
- the communities
- the stakeholder groups that impact your practice

It is important that you be inclusive in whom you involve—a cross-section that represents the diversity of the people you serve, ensuring that the decisions shaping the future state of child welfare are made with a focus on equity.

## 2. Ensure you have the capacity needed to power and implement ideas

How often has a practice improvement failed to deliver the improved outcomes that were identified and promised? Or an IT system failed to deliver the hoped-for change? Unfortunately, these improvements often underperform or fail because not enough attention is given to the amount of capacity needed by a child welfare agency to accommodate the desired changes. Instead, we tend just to load more weight and railcars onto the engine with the hope our agency can handle the added work without giving much thought, if at all, to the processes that are actually needed to support the desired change.

*While a new set of ideas and recommendations might be amazing, the results of the best human-centered design process will not happen without the engine or system capacity to deliver that experience.* Capacity allows systems to give staff the greatest gift of all: time. It is with additional time that Family First plans across the country can become a reality and families will thrive.

The only option you have to find capacity without additional resources (i.e., money, staff) is either to stop



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# Working hand-in-hand ...

## Policy

- Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (CAPTA)
- Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA)
- Families First & Preventative Services Act of 2018 (FFPSA)

## Practice

- Early intervention and prevention
- Community-based services
- More kids stay in home
- Enhance relative search
- 2GenWhole Family - anti-poverty work
- Transitional youth supports
- Balanced case loads
- Foster Care Supports
- Data Analytics



## People

- Staff Support & Development
- Community Support Services
- Inclusion, Diversity, Equity Work
- Person-Centered Design Efforts
- Trauma-Informed Care
- Engagement & Interactions within system (courts, law enforcement, schools, hospitals, etc.)

## Processes = Capacity

- Unlock the needed capacity to do what you need to do – and do best

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doing certain things, many of which, if not most, are regulated by policy or law, or to reimagine how we manage the flow of the work. This is where process improvement comes in and can enable the hope of improved design.

Processes are the engine of how work gets done in an agency. To make the engine more powerful—and regain the capacity needed to carry out what needs to be done—we must look where our current approaches are robbing us of time. Then we need to make that work visible and more consistent so it can be actively managed. This may feel unnatural in our practice-focused agencies, but it is essential because we know there is ample opportunity to capture capacity, reallocate it, and ensure the successful implementation of FFPSA. With this newfound capacity, agencies will have time to focus on the tasks fundamental to early intervention and prevention, like supporting families to allow children to stay in their homes or to conduct comprehensive relative searches.

Process improvement is a critical, not an optional, step. Unfortunately, it is one we see time and again being minimized or completely missed. What is

even worse, however, is embarking on a human-centered design effort with intentions of using process improvement to create change and then not following through.

We cannot stress enough that if you are not confident you will have adequate or increased capacity to implement and sustain any recommendations made as part of a human-centered design effort, then you will be better off not to pursue or undertake a human-centered design project at all. When you engage staff and others to share their ideas about what is needed and how a process can be improved, it creates an expectation that action will be taken. If you do not, or cannot, take action due to capacity challenges, it makes those you engage feel unvalued and creates a high level of frustration and disappointment.

## Reaching our Destination

In child welfare, policy, people, practice, and processes must work hand-in-hand to optimize the outcome of thriving families as illustrated in the diagram above.

Our policies (“tracks”) and practice (“railcars”) are our “intention,” what

we want to occur—the stated and desired outcomes of what we wish to accomplish. We rely on people to enact the work to achieve our intention and it is they who will benefit from it. Process is “how” it all happens; it’s the engine of our train, and this is where the greatest potential lies to unearth capacity. Only when you unleash the innovation and engagement of the people, and have the necessary capacity to do so, can you turn intention into action to achieve your practice and policy goals.

There is no doubt that many new primary, secondary, and tertiary services are being developed that offer great promise and can reshape the child welfare landscape with a newfound focus on early intervention and prevention. By committing to a human-centered design approach in support of process improvement, you are giving Family First a fighting chance to succeed and an opportunity to make meaningful impact in child welfare. Our families and children deserve this chance. It’s up to each and every one of us to help keep the train running smoothly. Together we can get to our destination—more thriving families. All aboard! 