



NEVER GETTING BEHIND AGAIN

How One Child Welfare Agency Used
the Pandemic to Transform Their Work
to Help Children and Families

BY BILL BOTT
AND SARAH SAILORS

In the early months of the 2020 pandemic shutdown, everyone in human services worked to maintain service delivery in unprecedented times. Many of us in child welfare, whose entire offices had to quarantine, watched as our service providers were forced to shut their doors, and had to redesign how to remain safe and healthy while still remaining intimately involved with the families and children that rely on us.

As our communities shut down and families began to isolate, we helplessly watched as the volume of calls to our hotlines plummeted from normal spring level, to summer levels, to far below any volume we have seen for years. An uneasy feeling settled upon our agencies as we asked, “Who will help our most vulnerable children if no one sees their need?”

The massive reduction in allegation calls came with the growing fear that if the calls were not coming in, there might be children that need our help that we will never know about.

Assessment was not the only area impacted. Almost overnight we saw our already overburdened court system forced to push hearings further and further out. We all hoped we were looking at weeks or months of shutdown, but it soon became apparent that we would be lucky if we were back in our offices by 2021. Children that could have been reunified were forced to stay in foster care, terminations of parental rights were delayed, and adoptions slowed. Wherever you worked in the child welfare system, COVID-19 impacted how you did your work.

Luckily, the heart of human services was mightier than the pandemic. We all know we rely on the heart and dedication of our amazing workforce. Child welfare is a calling as much as a career, and people who feel called to help children find a way to overcome even the scariest of obstacles. While adversity can bring out the best in us, it is not feasible to sustain a system designed in turmoil. However, sometimes the lessons we learn in hard times can make us better. Here are two lessons that the Indiana Department of Child Services (DCS) learned during the pandemic that will be part of their new normal.



Bill Bott is the Director of Performance Improvement for the Change & Innovation Agency (C!A).



Sarah Sailors, MSW, is the Deputy Director of Field Operations for the Indiana Department of Child Services.

Lesson 1: Time is a precious gift that keeps on giving.

With less than half the normal allegation volume, DCS used the time during the pandemic to purposefully attack any lingering work. Assessment workers caught up on their documentation and had time to follow up with collaterals. Case managers caught up on visits and notes through the travel time they saved by using virtual visits, or just fewer families to see. “Under normal operations, we run out of hours before we ever run out of tasks. During COVID-19, the hours were there, and we used it to get all caught up,” said one local supervisor.

As the number of late tasks decreased and more workers cleared up old reports, the constant stress of being under the weight of the backlog disappeared and the quality of the work improved. Given time, workers know the job and will do everything in their power to make the right decisions for children. Take the time away, and we rob them of the capacity to do their best.

Driven by this discovery, DCS began brainstorming how to provide the needed time when the higher volume returned. Without resources to add more people, the answer lay in three areas. First, we calculated the time needed to fully document an assessment report and identified who was using that documentation. We talked to the major groups who use write-ups—courts, permanency case workers, families, and quality assurance—and asked them what they needed most. This complete review of the various “customer needs” revealed that much of the work DCS produced was missing the mark. More important, we learned we could hit the marks, and reduce duplication and unnecessary narrative geared to safe children. This allowed us to reduce the time spent in front of a screen, allowing us more time in front of a family.

The second area focused on providing assessment workers with access to necessary resources when they needed them. At no point was this more important than when workers in the field needed advice or direction but were unable to risk

coming in to a communal office. We were forced to do a lot more by phone and via the computer. We also had to rely on one another so much more as this virus spread through our staff. Workers had to get used to working with supervisors who might be called to fill in at any time. Prior to the pandemic, DCS made tremendous efforts to staff offices with sufficient personnel, but when volume began to return to normal, supervisors found that there was simply not enough time—too many reports needed to funnel through a single person, potentially creating a bottleneck. Indiana’s answer was to provide supervisor-level expertise to workers as soon as they were ready. In only two months, this small group of supervisors handled as much as 60 percent of local assessments. As leadership shared, “We were seeing kids in a timely manner. We had even taken huge steps to assure we were making quality initial safety decisions during that critical first few days timeframe, but it was still weeks before we could conduct a full safety consult, document, and close. It wasn’t until we gave workers access to supervisors on their schedule that we saw a 60 percent reduction in open reports and have seen time-to-close shrink as well!”

Access to expertise and documentation built for the right customer now provides the time workers need to do the job correctly. The pandemic showed us the benefits of time, demonstrated how safety consults can be done outside the office, and forced us to change our process. What we learned is that these changes, when standardized and controlled, can radically increase capacity as well.

It’s not just the quality of the work that improves, it’s the quality of the worker’s life. When we signed up for this job, we knew we would miss family events so we could help another family in need. With a reduced caseload, the job pressure is still there, but the pressure of being behind is reduced. Social workers in Indiana are already reporting an improved work-life balance and hoping it leads to less turnover and higher job satisfaction.

Lesson 2: We have avoided technology long enough.

The ability to meet virtually is nothing new. Sure, there are some companies that made it easy and scalable, but our ability to meet via our computers is almost as old as the AOL startup ring. For whatever reason, we never fully embraced virtual meetings until we were forced to turn on the camera, find a suitable background that hid the piles of laundry, and take our place in the Hollywood Squares board in front of us. What the pandemic forced us into we have learned to love ... or at least exploit.

When foster families were forced to isolate and in-person visits became too risky, TEAMS online meeting was there. When courts could not hold in-person hearings, but still needed updates and wanted to hear from case-workers, Zoom came to the rescue. And when service providers needed time with clients, but could not be within six feet of one another, WebEx opened the door. There is no longer any reason to ignore the power of this technology. The time saved by

Luckily, the heart of human services was mightier than the pandemic. We all know we rely on the heart and dedication of our amazing workforce. Child welfare is a calling as much as a career, and people who feel called to help children find a way to overcome even the scariest of obstacles.


not sitting in court waiting to see if a family will make the docket or if parents without reliable transportation will arrive in time is outweighed by our ability to check in and offer support without hours of road time.

This does not mean that virtual visits should replace those in person, or that every interaction we can do online should be done that way, but we have learned that meeting technology provides a viable, low-cost, high-reward option.

The DCS is exploring the role technology will play as we move forward. And not just for virtual meetings, but for managing case flow, mining data,

and automating some of the work functions that are manual today. We have seen what true mobility looks like, and the potential exists that, with the right technology, we can meet children where they are.

Moving Forward

We are fundamentally different after having lived through this period of time. That can be a good thing. For Indiana, we are optimistic that these lessons will help us build capacity to help more children, allowing us to do a better job at what we have been called to do, and to better prepare ourselves for the next adversity using our new-found processes. 

APHSA THIS WEEK IN WASHINGTON

American Public Human Services Association

APHSA's *This Week in Washington (TWIW)* is a weekly newsletter offering information about health and human services legislative updates from the Hill and the Administration.

Subscribe Today – or as an APHSA member, you'll receive *TWIW* as one of the many great benefits available to you!

**SNAP QR CODES TO
LEARN MORE ABOUT:**



**APHSA
MEMBERSHIP**



**APHSA
NEWSLETTERS**