



# How Will Your Child Welfare System Stack Up Against the Laws of Gravity?

## Capacity-Building Strategies to Strengthen Your Agency's Foundation

By Sean Toole and Kelly Harder, MSW

**A**cross the country, our child welfare systems are struggling with a lack of experienced staff. Unfortunately, high turnover and vacancies are occurring at a time when there are growing numbers of families being supported and agencies are facing a critical need to expand prevention services. We are both losing capacity while increasing demand and the strain on agencies is significant.

It feels a bit like a game of Jenga. You start with this solid, stable tower comprised of many aligned pieces. As the game progresses, the pieces are removed from the foundation and precariously repositioned layer upon layer as the tower grows ever higher—each move adding to its instability. Then suddenly, the structure's capacity to hold itself together has been exceeded, and there's a crash with the tower ending up all over the floor (and at least one piece goes missing under the couch!). You know that the game will ultimately end that way. All you can do is hope it does not happen on your turn.

Our child welfare systems can feel like we are in a similar spot. We are attempting to grow and expand our systems by moving pieces one by one—moving toward earlier intervention and prevention while stretching our limited capacity—all in an effort to reach higher to help families thrive. But with each move, the entire system risks collapse,

and unlike Jenga, we are losing resources, not just repositioning. We cannot risk that tumbling outcome, given the consequences to the lives of children, families, and agency workers.

To address this very real risk, we need to employ strategies that actively reinforce our systems and provide sufficient capacity to handle everything that comes our way in the form of practice, policy, and staff shortages. To ensure we understand the strategies needed, let's first examine the challenges that are driving system instability.

### **Our Foundation is Compromised**

The child welfare system is generally outdated in how it processes and manages cases and is out of alignment with workforce expectations and the reality of talent availability. This misalignment results in a child welfare system that tends to lack the capacity to attend to the fundamental health and safety work required. Here are some key staffing issues that are missing from our Jenga tower today that need to be addressed:

#### ***Turnover Drains Capacity***

Nationally, social worker turnover is around 25 percent and continues to trend upward. For instance, one state experienced 55 percent state-wide turnover for entry-level caseworkers in fiscal year 2022, with some regions experiencing 119

percent and 86 percent. Another state had a turnover rate of 25 percent in 2015. In recent years, the turnover rate dropped to 13 percent, but since the pandemic, the rate has inched up to 23 percent. Unfortunately, this increase in turnover comes at a time when child abuse investigations are increasing, which requires even more staff capacity that simply does not exist. As trained staff leave, they are being replaced with caseworkers who lack institutional knowledge and real-life experience. More than 50 percent of all caseworkers now have less than two years of experience. The vacancies are significant, and the staff that remains has less experience.

### **Filling Vacant Positions Strains Systems**

For agencies trying to fill vacant positions, the applicant pool is extremely limited, and many states report that they cannot even get qualified applicants for the positions they post. In recent months, states with which we have engagements have consistently shared that caseworker vacancies are taking more than 100 days to fill. One state found that, on average, they receive six applicants per posting, an 84 percent decrease

in applicants compared to the period prior to COVID-19. Another state found applicant numbers are down 70 percent. They attribute much of this decrease in applicants to preference of mental health agency opportunities, as they are able to offer higher salaries, and to schools, as they provide time off. The staff is not coming back to child welfare agencies with the existing conditions.

### **Workers Unwilling to Sacrifice Work–Life Balance**

The work of child welfare professionals is demanding and often requires long hours. While previous generations have been willing to sacrifice work–life balance, the new generation of workers is not as willing to do so. Many current and incoming child welfare workers are expecting, if not demanding, a more balanced life experience and are willing to leave employment, no matter their tenure.

### **Time to Face the Facts About Our Tower**

We must accept our reality. There is not enough professional staff in the “pipeline,” either enrolling in college social sciences, graduating, or currently in the workforce, at least based upon current working models of practice. With an open mind, we must fundamentally rethink how we keep kids safe and mitigate risk in the lives of our families.

If we acknowledge that our tower is built on a child welfare staffing formula and an expected practice model that is fundamentally outdated or out of alignment with today’s current level of system capacity, workforce availability, and staff expectations, then what actions can we take to strengthen our agency’s foundation?



**Sean Toole** is the Senior Vice President at Change & Innovation Agency (C!A®).



**Kelly Harder, MSW**, is the Child Welfare Practice Lead and Industry Partner at C!A®.

### **Reinforce Your Tower Base with These Critical Capacity-Building Pieces**

**1. Align your child welfare practice model to the reality of your available workforce.** Let’s face it, you may not have enough trained social workers or professionals in your state, county, or community to fill all the vacant positions. To address the

challenge, it is time to be creative and embrace the “art of the possible.”

To improve alignment with the demand and build capacity, agencies are trying new approaches, including:

- **Match skill to task**—Hire non-degreed case aides to support a caseworker, serve as a scribe, take notes and action items, and serve as nonclinical or administrative assistants.
- **Minimize travel times**—Continue using Teams or Zoom for many family team meetings or training.
- **Organize by team**—Test a team approach to working cases (i.e., pairing an investigator with an in-home specialist to front-load services to avoid children needing to come into foster care).
- **Partner**—Pair caseworkers where one focuses on adult issues while the other focuses on child issues, working together for the permanency of the child and to close cases in a timely manner.
- **Invest in specialists**—Allow Team Specialists to assist caseworkers with administrative tasks. This has helped improve worker satisfaction, retention, and timeliness in completing administrative tasks.

**2. Rethink process to make the system more resilient.** Our perspective on the child welfare system is that in nearly every jurisdiction—crisis or no crisis—there is a fundamental lack of capacity in our agencies to accurately and effectively complete the work required. Despite workers’ best intentions and their dedication to children and families, there is simply not enough time available to complete all the work in a timely manner and with high quality, or even fidelity. Therefore, staff members compensate as best they can to do what, in their professional opinion, is safest for the families they serve. They minimize or delay documentation, keep safe cases open longer than necessary to prioritize high-risk cases, exceed administrative deadlines, and complete fewer family visits. While these compensations to address the reality of their situation impact the families, staff workers have no other choice when trying to adhere to

well-intentioned policy and practice that require time that is just not available to them.

Therefore, we must focus on our processes to more deeply understand where and why we are losing capacity. We would suggest you start by mapping your current processes by each segment along the child welfare continuum. Follow that with a staff-and-manager-centric “to-be” design approach to optimize your work process. Next, you will need to make that information visible to see and understand what is happening in real time. See how cases are flowing beyond mandated caseload numbers. Finally, you need to make the data smarter, with insights that can optimize work processes to help speed up critical decisions and action.

Here are some examples of how states, counties, and other jurisdictions are leaning in to reconsider process as a means to build capacity:

- Complete and implement process improvements—Complete a full business process redesign effort to identify opportunities to increase capacity in Intake, Investigation, On-Going Case Management In/Out of Home, and Licensing/Kinship Care.
- Manage cases by risk—Pilot Child Protective Services investigative teams, which includes hiring “special investigators” (i.e., ex-law enforcement), being co-housed with local law enforcement, and adding specialists to teams such as nurses, substance abuse counselors, and psychologists to work cases together on a regular basis.
- Close cases in a timelier manner—Implement a team to close investigations when a decision is reached, or to hand off less acute cases to staff that can complete the investigation (e.g., call collaterals, obtain medical records).
- Share capacity—Create “roving” teams to travel and help counties struggling to meet demand, especially with investigations, and redistribute caseload.

### 3. Create differential workflows.

Along most segments of the child welfare continuum of work, cases tend to fall into one of three categories:

high, medium, or low risk. While it would seem the lower-risk cases require less work, the reality is that most work models dictate the exact same number of face-to-face visits each month, as well as frequency of face-to-face supervision, regardless if a case is considered high- or low-risk. Working with states across the country, we often observe vast amounts of time spent completing compliance-related activities that offer little value to each case, yet rob staff and supervisors of time they could apply to higher-value tasks. We strongly encourage systems to reexamine their case maintenance protocols to align worker and supervisor activities to the individual needs of the case rather than applying a broad, one-size fits all practice approach.

States, counties, and other jurisdictions are rethinking workflows in the following ways:

- Close cases in a timely manner—Adopt a Central Consult decision-making model, which consists of centralizing a team of supervisors to provide timely and competent staffing and documenting of child abuse investigations where it is determined that abuse or neglect has not occurred, and children are safe. This allows more time for unit supervisors to spend with caseworkers on situations where abuse or neglect has occurred, and children are unsafe. It also allows for states to tap into a nationwide workforce, since central consultation is done virtually.
- Consider experience—Modify requirements around monthly supervision staffing to align more with individual case status and staff experience.
- Allow for flexibility under guidelines—Apply creative and individualized practice protocols for staff to check in with cases that are stable and waiting for permanency paperwork and align the ongoing support according to risk level.

**4. Apply automation.** When faced with the reality of a limited workforce, we can look toward technology to automate as many non-essential human interaction tasks as possible. To generate capacity, look for

opportunities to complete tasks or reduce the chance of error.

We are seeing states, counties, and other jurisdictions utilize automation to generate capacity in the following ways:

- Make process visible—Deliver real-time data reports so child welfare leaders and managers know the precise process status of each case that is open in their system.
- Reduce administrative burden—Improve how information is captured and shared. Use electronic submission of documents, such as court reports, family assessments, school information, and benefit applications that are more readily available.
- Provide access to family—Deploy client- or public-facing portals or web-enabled ways for family and worker bi-directional communication and self-service.
- Provide access to service providers—Help providers more easily self-service the information they need to provide support to case management, removing tasks from caseworkers.
- Improve work forecasting—Develop models for current and future workforce needs that account for real-time workload changes in attrition, reduced caseload, length of time onboarding, and other factors.
- Automate administrative functions—Utilize technology to support automatic tracking or data entry of time, mileage, and expenses, so caseworkers may avoid manual processes that rob capacity.

## Conclusion

If you can address these four specific capacity-generating approaches, or shall we say, key Jenga pieces, you are essentially replacing key elements into the foundation that will provide the very reinforcement and capacity needed to realign and stabilize your organization. The challenges that child welfare agencies are facing are not new—they are just reaching a newly critical threshold. Children and families depend on all of us to make these essential, challenging, and critical improvement moves so we can best serve those who need us today and into the future. Every piece in our system must be optimized to help families thrive! It's your move. 