

Unlocking the Power of Data to Transform Child Welfare

Child welfare agencies work diligently every day to support families and protect the well-being of children. But in recent years, these agencies have faced a range of challenges that make it more difficult to achieve their mission. A volatile and highly competitive job market has led to growing vacancies across the public sector, especially in social services where the pay is often lower and the work comes with a unique set of challenges.

At the same time, child welfare agencies must embrace digital service delivery to facilitate constituent self-service and improve engagement. They must also drive workforce automation that enables them to do more with less, better assess program effectiveness, and address evolving compliance and reporting requirements.

To meet all these demands, agencies must improve data management. Child welfare agencies and the vast array of stakeholders involved in the well-being of families collect an inordinate amount of data, but they often face challenges leveraging and optimizing this information. To maximize their use of data, child welfare agencies will need to make operational, cultural and technological shifts that address issues related to data collection, sharing and analysis.

A secure data hub platform is one technology that can help child welfare agencies aggregate and synthesize the wealth of data to build a data-

driven culture — and transform data into a true strategic asset that improves outcomes for children and families.

Current Barriers for State and Local Agencies

As child welfare agencies seek to improve program effectiveness and drive better outcomes, they'll need to address several barriers that affect how they deploy data.

Data usability is one of the core challenges, says Bobby Cagle, former director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services and CEO of Cagle Consulting, a firm that specializes in human services and child welfare consulting.

"My common experience across the U.S. in three different states has been that a lack of usability and user friendliness of technology systems oftentimes delays the entry of data," Cagle says.¹

Additionally, limited real-time access to data impacts data quality, compliance and caseworker decision-making on case planning and child safety.

"The longer data entry is delayed into relevant systems, the more likely the quality of that data is compromised," says Carole Hussey, a health and human services market strategist who has worked with state and county governments to implement technologies that support human services programs.

Misperceptions and different interpretations of privacy restrictions

— and what data is and isn't shareable, particularly regarding HIPAA privacy regulations — present another significant barrier. To provide greater clarity and guide data improvement efforts in its own agency, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) developed an Interoperability Action Plan. The agency has also evaluated legal requirements for data sharing to give state and local agencies better guidance.

All these challenges point to a much larger problem, Hussey says: Child welfare agencies need to create a data-driven culture at the practice level. Too often, data management is viewed as solely an IT issue. However, agencies need to empower every employee with data — regardless of whether they are in a technical role.

A Data Action Plan

As agencies seek to address workforce vacancies, demand for improved constituent experiences, and ongoing compliance and reporting needs, they should focus on strengthening their data management practice. The following best practices can help them accelerate their data maturity:

1 / Set your data vision

Agency leaders need to establish a strategic vision for the use of data and align it to the outcomes they want to achieve. They must think about data from the client perspective, and not solely



from their agency's perspective, Hussey advises. This requires implementing tools to automate the collection of client feedback. From there, agencies can analyze this data and use it to advance human-centered design. Creating a data culture starts at the top, with leadership prioritizing data as a critical component to the mission of the organization.

2 / Conduct a data inventory

Agencies must understand what data exists within their organizations and where it lives. They must also identify their needs for external data that could improve operations and collaboration across the health and human services continuum. This effort will require collective buy-in from key stakeholders, but it's necessary before agencies even consider onboarding new technologies or making any process changes.

3 / Leverage a secure data integration and data management platform

Agencies will need to create a single source of truth for information within their organization. This is where a secure data integration and data management platform is invaluable. As they assess platforms, agencies should look for a platform that offers a unified data hub that can easily surface relevant data to inform child welfare decisions. Unified data hub platforms should offer the following capabilities:

■ Embedded, multi-layered security

Multi-layered security that's an integral part of the enterprise architecture

enables secure, granular-level sharing of integrated data and strengthens security at the data level, says Gary Katz, solutions director and senior account executive at MarkLogic, a leading data management solutions provider. This prevents unauthorized data access regardless of whether an organization uses role-based, policy-based or attribute-based access controls.

"[With these capabilities], there's literally no way someone can access information that they're not privy to," Katz says.

■ Simplified data onboarding and collection

An effective data management and integration platform should offer automated capabilities that accelerate data collection and analysis and can ingest data as-is. This streamlines data onboarding in a way that helps agencies avoid labor and time-intensive data clean-up and formatting.

■ Robust search tools for improved discoverability

Agencies also need the ability to not only analyze data, but to easily interrogate data. To accomplish this, agencies need to be able to ask questions of data via multiple lenses that incorporate geospatial, time-based, fuzzy and relationship-based queries all at once. A data hub with robust search tools can simplify this process.

The right platform will allow agencies to ask questions of their data to address different use cases,

such as helping caseworkers assess complex family dynamics as they make reunification decisions or ensuring child placements are not within proximity of known sex offenders.

■ The ability to analyze diverse data sets

Agencies collect an array of information, so they will benefit most from a data management and integration platform that lets them examine a variety of unstructured, structured, semi-structured, quantitative and qualitative data sources — including numerical data, text and metadata.

A solution with artificial intelligence-driven natural language processing capabilities can allow agencies to enrich and curate data to make it more usable and discoverable, as well as enhance information and extract insights like narrative context from caseworker notes.

Stronger data management can empower child welfare workers with the information and insights they need to make life better for children and families. With this foundation, agencies can build a truly data-driven culture — one that powerfully combines a growing universe of data with the institutional knowledge of their dedicated team to drive meaningful impact.

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1 <https://webinars.govtech.com/The-Urgency-of-Data-Sharing-in-Transforming-Child-Welfare-141373.html>

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