

Evaluation of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's On the Frontline Initiative: Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Background

On the Frontline (OTF), an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Child Welfare Strategy Group, is a front-end effort to enhance a child welfare agency's organizational capacity to improve decision-making practices, and ultimately improve child safety. According to OTF, strengthening the front end of the child welfare system involves the implementation of three concurrent strategies: (1) build a strong workforce, (2) strengthen system decision making and (3) strengthen worker decision making. The Build a Strong Workforce (Workforce) strategy aims to address workforce stability and competence, bringing both human resources (HR) and child welfare staff to the table to improve hiring practices. The Strengthen System Decision Making (SDM) strategy aims to develop a system feedback mechanism that combines quantitative data measures with qualitative case review data to observe patterns, identify issues and create data-informed solutions to improve practice. The Strengthen Worker Decision Making (WDM) strategy focuses on understanding how frontline decisions are made and implementing strategies to support and improve decision making. To test the OTF concept, Casey invited three public child welfare agencies to implement the three concurrent strategies, which they began in January 2015. Two agencies, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and Jefferson County, Colorado, sustained these efforts and are the focus of this implementation evaluation report.

Evaluation Methods

Guided by the initiative's logic model, the OTF implementation evaluation tested conceptual linkages between activities (e.g., workforce hiring activities) and expected outputs (e.g., vacancy rates and turnover and the theorized relationship to child safety). The evaluation examined seven questions regarding the implementation process:

1. What was the process of site selection?
2. How do stakeholders define the OTF initiative's purpose, goals and key activities?
3. Was the OTF initiative implemented as intended?
4. What aspects of implementation have gone well? What have been the barriers?

5. What results were observed in expected OTF outputs?
6. Are there signs of an emerging shift toward improvement in child safety outcomes?
7. What are the key lessons learned and recommendations?

The evaluation team used a retrospective, mixed methods evaluation design. For the qualitative portion, we conducted interviews and focus groups at each site and with Casey leaders and consultants, completed an extensive review of more than 120 documents pertaining to OTF development and conducted thematic analysis. The quantitative study consisted of a web-based survey in each site and analysis of quarterly administrative data compiled during OTF implementation. We conducted descriptive analysis of survey data and interrupted time series (ITS) analysis of administrative data to assess whether trends changed once OTF was introduced.

Evaluation Findings

Participants from both Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties reported that they had extensive agency and Casey resources available to champion the work. Casey technical assistance (TA) helped them form a steering committee and establish work groups to implement the three OTF strategies. Each work group developed a work plan and began implementing activities for each strategy, initially focusing on the front end but soon extending activities across program areas.

The Workforce strategy showed consistent implementation and positive results. It was clearly defined, with prescribed activities guided by TA consultants with expertise in child welfare and HR. Both sites used data to predict hiring needs and revised their hiring process. They implemented pre-vacancy positions, continual job postings and realistic job previews and implemented a team-based approach to the interview process, assessing behavioral-based competencies to do the job. The sites differed in that Jefferson County developed an automated position tracking report to predict hiring needs, whereas Cuyahoga County used data but is still developing an automated report. And, in these different contexts, the team-based approach in Cuyahoga County engaged supervisors and managers in hiring teams, whereas Jefferson County engaged supervisors and caseworkers. Both sites noted challenges in implementation, but both also felt positive about the Workforce strategy.

Based on multiple data sources, there was preliminary evidence of decreases in vacancy rates, time to fill a position and, in Jefferson County, turnover. Vacancy rates decreased in both sites, based on

administrative and qualitative data. The strongest evidence comes from an ITS analysis in Jefferson County, showing that the OTF initiative was associated with an estimated 5.7 percent decrease in vacancy rates compared to baseline, although no causal connection can be made. Time to fill positions also decreased, as evidenced by administrative data in Jefferson County (43 days fewer, on average, in ITS analysis) and qualitative data from both sites. Administrative data provide preliminary evidence of some improvement in turnover in Jefferson County, where turnover was increasing during baseline but began to decrease once OTF began; however, staff perceptions varied. Cuyahoga County's administrative data showed consistently low turnover rates (2.5-4.1%) during the implementation period, although no baseline data were available for comparison.

Sites successfully engaged in the expected SDM activities with some notable parallels but also key differences. Both sites developed and used actionable data, which facilitated the work of all three work streams. They created site-specific indicator measures and reports and increased their use of data to inform decision making at the agency level. They integrated data into their managerial oversight process to identify and respond to practice-related issues. Both created system feedback mechanisms that were agency specific. Cuyahoga County chose to implement the recommended OTF ChildStat model, while Jefferson County developed Red Team-QA (quality assurance), a process that built on their existing infrastructure, as well as other system feedback processes, including internal focus groups and an annual staff satisfaction survey followed by efforts to address staff concerns. In the end, both sites accomplished the original objective to enhance agency and managerial capacity to identify and respond to “systemic barriers affecting frontline work.” There was, however, considerable variation by site in participants' experiences with implementation of system feedback mechanisms.

Sites took different implementation approaches to WDM activities. Each site approached the development of actionable data distinctly. Cuyahoga County set out to compile information from other administrative data sources for frontline caseworkers to support their decision making; although they faced barriers, this was the catalyst for a caseworker iPad resource app. Jefferson County decided to use their existing data resources to create a system-wide process to improve agency practices. Both sites made efforts to reduce workloads, and Jefferson County developed several tools to support this work. Both sites developed a supervisory model or process. Jefferson County implemented the supervisory process, which, participants said, provided increased consistency in individual supervision.

WDM results were mixed. Qualitative findings support workload reductions in both sites. In Jefferson County, administrative data provided empirical evidence of this. OTF was associated with a decrease in the average number of new assessments per worker (an estimated 1.1 fewer new assessments per month, on average) in ITS analysis. Participants perceived some improvements in supervision. On the worker decision-making indicators, there was evidence of improved timeliness in decision making for non-investigative assessments in both sites, but no evidence of improvement for decision-making quality measures; findings for the remaining WDM indicators varied by site.

Lessons Learned and Cross-Cutting Key Findings

Participants in the OTF initiative learned three collective lessons: (1) engage staff at all levels and across all programs; (2) create clear and agency-specific plans and goals and stick with them and (3) develop a system feedback loop, and be open to reflection and feedback from all levels, including frontline caseworkers. The evaluation team identified five key cross-cutting findings: (1) OTF was resource intensive and technical assistance was essential; (2) agency leadership and contextual factors influenced implementation; (3) the Workforce strategy showed consistent implementation and positive results; (4) the SDM strategy led to increased use of actionable data and highlighted the importance of frontline caseworker feedback and (5) the WDM strategy varied in implementation and showed mixed results.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the evaluation team recommends several approaches for future implementation in other sites pursuing similar reforms:

Recommendation #1. Replicate the Workforce Strategy in Other Jurisdictions. The OTF designers set out to improve the hiring process and stabilize the workforce by implementing activities connected to the Workforce strategy. While both sites differed in context, they developed parallel methods that changed their hiring practices, reduced vacancy rates and reduced time to fill positions. We expect, if approached in a similar manner with the necessary infrastructure, that similar positive results would emerge in other sites. We recommend replication and further evaluation of the Workforce strategy.

Recommendation #2. Replace the WDM Strategy. WDM varied in implementation and showed mixed results. We recommend that the OTF designers consider several ideas to inform replacement of the WDM strategy with supervision and coaching.

Recommendation #3. Add a Direct Frontline Caseworker Feedback Process to the ChildStat Model (or alternate system feedback mechanism) as part of the SDM Strategy. Direct frontline caseworker views are essential for a system feedback process, and the ChildStat model does not provide one.

Recommendation #4. Refine the Outputs in the Logic Model and Their Measures. We recommend refining the following outputs: worker competence; increased awareness between front-end practice and permanency; improved assessment quality; and improved understanding of policies by staff outputs, so agencies and evaluators can measure them more effectively.

Recommendation #5. Consider Sequencing Implementation, Particularly in Large Sites, to Make the Process More Manageable. Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties executed all three strategies at the same time and saw the value in concurrent implementation. However, they also said if they had prioritized, they would have chosen Workforce to stabilize vacancy rates. It may be worthwhile to prioritize them in sites that are interested in OTF but are unable to initiate all three simultaneously because of the size of the site.