

Capacity Building for INNOVATION in Child Welfare

Over the past few years, the field of child welfare field has undergone tremendous change in the capacity to develop and implement new practices and technologies to meet new challenges. While the terms “child welfare” and “innovation” may not seem synonymous, State and jurisdictional child welfare agencies are implementing some exciting innovations, including, but not limited to:



- ▶ **Simulation training software that uses video game techniques** and narrative storytelling to supplement child welfare worker training, providing opportunities for child welfare workers to practice learned skills safely within a realistic environment
- ▶ **User-friendly data dashboards and cloud computing software** to help managers and workers access information more easily both in the office and on the go
- ▶ **Social media** to more easily and effectively interact with young people currently and formerly in foster care
- ▶ **Parent-mentor and parent partner programs** to engage parents more fully in the child welfare process and provide support, modeling, and links to assist families in meeting their safety, permanency, and well-being goals
- ▶ **Child welfare worker safety protocols** to help keep child welfare workers safer on the job

These innovations and others help child welfare agencies and the child welfare workforce do their jobs more efficiently, be better informed and prepared, and spend more quality time helping children and families. In this way, child welfare agency investment in innovations ultimately benefits children, young people, and families served by the child welfare system.

“**Innovation**” can be defined as the creation and/or adoption of new ideas and practices to improve organizational outcomes (Borins, 2006). Innovations implemented in the public sector often are **sustaining innovations**, ones that improve existing products or services, rather than **disruptive innovations**, ones that reshape the existing landscape completely. Child welfare agencies need both types of innovations to improve outcomes for children and families (Deloitte, 2012). In addition, depending on the scope and scale of the new practice or idea, agencies may need a structured implementation framework, such as the Development, Implementation, and Assessment Approach (Permanency Innovations Initiative Training and Technical Assistance Project, 2016). It is important to note that an innovation does not need to be large in scope to make a positive impact for children and families in the child welfare system.

Some key areas for innovation involve integrating current technological advances, many of which can assist in improving efficiency and outcomes in processes and systems. These advances include cloud computing, data analysis and access, and foster care matching software, among other innovations. Increasing permanency, improving child protective services, instituting trauma-responsive care programs, and instituting collaborations between child welfare and other service agencies also serve as important areas in present and future innovations (LaLiberte, Barry, & Bertram, 2016).

Although it may be too early to determine whether and to what degree innovations in technology, systems, and processes improve outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system, results in the private sector have shown promise. For example, implementing technological innovation has resulted in reduced costs, improved employee satisfaction, better knowledge access, and increased revenue for 69 percent of companies that adopted Web 2.0 and social networking technology as part of their business practices (Feely & Gill, 2011). As more States adopt workforce, process, and technological innovations, agencies can think about ways to assess the impact of these new technologies.

Five Components of Capacity Building for Innovation

The Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative (Collaborative) defines “**capacity building**” as an ongoing, evidence-informed process used to develop a system’s potential to be productive and effective. The Collaborative has organized different aspects of organizational capacity into five general categories or dimensions: resources, infrastructure, knowledge and skills, culture and climate, and engagement and partnership (Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative, 2015). The sections below describe the importance of each dimension in building agency capacity for innovation, and provide some strategies for capacity building in each area.

Resources

New innovations need funding, people, and the right equipment or technology to support them. Experts historically have identified a lack of resources as one of the biggest challenges to innovation in the public sector (Borins, 2006). These resources include concrete materials and assets, such as staff, funding, facilities, equipment, data collection tools and systems, informational and program materials, curricula, and technology. While innovation does not always entail financial expense, allocating resources necessary for implementation may produce steep costs for States and jurisdictions.

Budgeting and resource allocation serve as central processes of all public sector organizations and will be of significant consideration for management. Acquiring tools and resources for innovation may take creativity. In some cases, leadership can reallocate existing resources to the department in charge of overseeing the innovation. In other situations, advocates for innovation may make the case that a particular software or intervention may reduce spending while improving outcomes (Daglio, Gerson, & Kitchen, 2015). Other possibilities might include using funds recovered as overage from other programs and partnering with organizations willing to cosponsor the innovation (Borins, 2006). Alternately, States may seek to pilot an innovation at minimal cost before moving to more widespread implementation (Deloitte, 2012).



Infrastructure

Innovations are not created in a vacuum—they emerge from an organization with a healthy infrastructure that is set up to support useful innovations. Organizational infrastructure provides for accountability, policy and procedural consistency, and efficiency (Daglio et al., 2015). States and jurisdictions can use several strategies to build capacity for innovation in the context of existing infrastructure. First, agencies and others can seek clarification and simplification of existing regulations. Sometimes, all it takes to implement an innovation in a given area is a simple rule update. Innovators must get agency leaders on board with the proposed innovation through the tactics of **persuasion** (showing the benefits of an innovation) and **accommodation** (working and consulting with affected parties to involve them in the governance of an innovation) (Borins, 2006). Once innovators have implemented an innovation, they must establish a clear quality control process to ensure the innovation works as intended and to make improvements going forward (Wandersman, Chien, & Katz, 2012).

Knowledge and Skills

A qualified and stable child welfare workforce serves as the foundation of child welfare service delivery. To effectively serve children and families, child welfare workers must have access to the knowledge, training, and technical skills that will allow them to do so. This is particularly true when a child welfare agency implements a technological or

practice innovation, because the implementation of an innovation almost always requires that child welfare staff at different levels develop and apply new knowledge and skills (e.g., application of evidence-informed practices, technical skills, etc.). To implement innovative strategies within child welfare systems, administrators need to rely on the workforce's existing knowledge and skills, including practice knowledge, leadership skills, team building, analytic abilities, and cultural responsiveness. They also need to invest time and resources to make sure new and existing workers have appropriate training in the skills required to apply the innovation properly; not doing so will decrease staff buy-in for the innovation and decrease the likelihood of its successful implementation.

Culture and Climate

Organizational culture and climate can affect an agency's ability to innovate and gain buy-in when it introduces new initiatives. In fact, research suggests that "organizational interventions that create positive culture and climate profiles can be used to support innovation and improve service effectiveness" (Glisson, 2015, Changing Organizational Culture section, para. 1).

Having the right culture and climate, defined as norms, beliefs, values, and attitudes that influence behavior, is one of the most important aspects of encouraging organizational innovation. As a number of innovation researchers have found, innovation starts at the top. This does not mean that innovation occurs only at the top of an organizational hierarchy; in fact, fully one-half of all government innovations in the United States originate from middle managers and frontline staff, more than from any other group (Borins, 2006). However, for innovation to succeed, within child welfare systems, the work of innovators must receive support from agency leadership.

Organizational leaders should commit themselves to becoming **innovating organizations**, ones that support innovation at every level of capacity. Organizations that support innovation also should make a commitment to becoming **learning organizations**. Creating a learning organization depends on "effective leadership, which is not based on a traditional hierarchy, but rather, is a mix of different people from all levels of the system, who lead in different ways" (Mason, n.d., Why Is It for Us? section, para. 2). Organizational effectiveness and innovation depend on having strong leaders who can impact the capacity to foster change and innovation—particularly "first-level" leaders, who supervise individuals providing direct services (Aarons, Ehrhart, Farahnak, & Hurlburt, 2015).



Motivation serves as another important component of having a culture conducive to innovation. Although research suggests that material rewards can motivate the cultivation of an entrepreneurial mindset in public service employees, public recognition and a clear understanding of how innovations will positively impact the well-being of others serve as greater incentives (Daglio et al., 2015).

Engagement and Partnership

Child welfare systems tend to face complex and multifaceted challenges; to solve them, solutions should come from many sources, including workers at all levels, partner agencies, private and community organizations, and stakeholders. In fact, "there must be a realization that we all have inherent power to find solutions to the problems we are faced with, and that we can and will envision a future and forge ahead to create it" (Mason, n.d., Why Is It for Us? section, para. 2). Thus, engagement and partnership serve as critically important parts of successful innovation in the public sector. This means developing interorganizational and intraorganizational relationships, such as internal teaming, connections, stakeholder involvement, communications, and interagency collaboration. Depending on the innovation, innovators in the public sector may work to find private or voluntary organizations to help develop the innovation and share the cost. In addition, agencies working as innovating organizations should empower communities and citizens, especially youth and parents currently or formerly involved with the child welfare system, to contribute to innovation building by consulting them in policy making or inviting them to play a role in innovation implementation. Not only do such practices provide valuable information and data for innovators, they also help create buy-in for the innovation among the public.

Challenges to Innovation

The challenges facing implementation of innovation at the State level can roughly be grouped into three areas. The first area encompasses difficulties related to governmental organization; the second area consists of difficulties related to the political environment; and a third area consists of societal difficulties, that is, those outside of government (see table 1) (Borins, 2006). While all innovations will have challenges, innovators can surmount most of them if tackled early enough in the innovation process. The table below summarizes some common challenges and possible solutions to innovating in child welfare.

Table 1 (Adapted from Borins, 2006)

Challenges to Implementation and Solutions		
Area	Challenges	Solutions
Organizational challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Logistical and coordination difficulties ▶ Technological difficulties ▶ “New initiative” burnout ▶ Union or other opposition ▶ Managerial bias 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Persuade others through evidence and data of the innovation’s efficacy. ▶ Involve managers and colleagues in work on the innovation. ▶ Acquire necessary skills and knowledge to overcome technological difficulties. ▶ Ask for help inside or outside of the organization.
Political challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Inadequate funding or lack of other resources ▶ Legislative or regulatory constraints ▶ Political opposition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Work with others to simplify or reinterpret rules and regulations that hinder innovation. ▶ Find and work with innovation “champions” in the organization’s leadership. ▶ Work with agency leadership to allocate funding for innovation development.
Societal challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Doubts about the efficacy of new government initiatives ▶ Private sector opposition ▶ Idea that innovation can occur only in the private sector ▶ Difficulty reaching the innovation’s primary target audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Collaborate with private sector organizations to develop the innovation. ▶ “Market” the innovation (using social media and other direct outreach tools) to the primary target audience and the public at large.

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