

What Does an Effective Child Welfare Agency Look Like?

Nearly everywhere staff from the NCCD Children's Research Center (CRC) go to work on child welfare system improvement, they hear the same question: "Who is doing child welfare work really well?"

Workers and supervisors who want to know what good child welfare practice looks like ask this question. Researchers, data analysts, and those interested in continuous quality improvement (CQI) efforts ask this question. Managers and administrators who want to make sure their leadership is on target ask this question.

I wish the answer were easier. Many places do many parts of this work well. However, all the agencies we work with are dealing with more families with more complex problems in environments with shrinking access to resources. It's tough work.

I sometimes think a second question is embedded in the first, and this is one I can more easily answer: "What does an effective child welfare agency look like?"

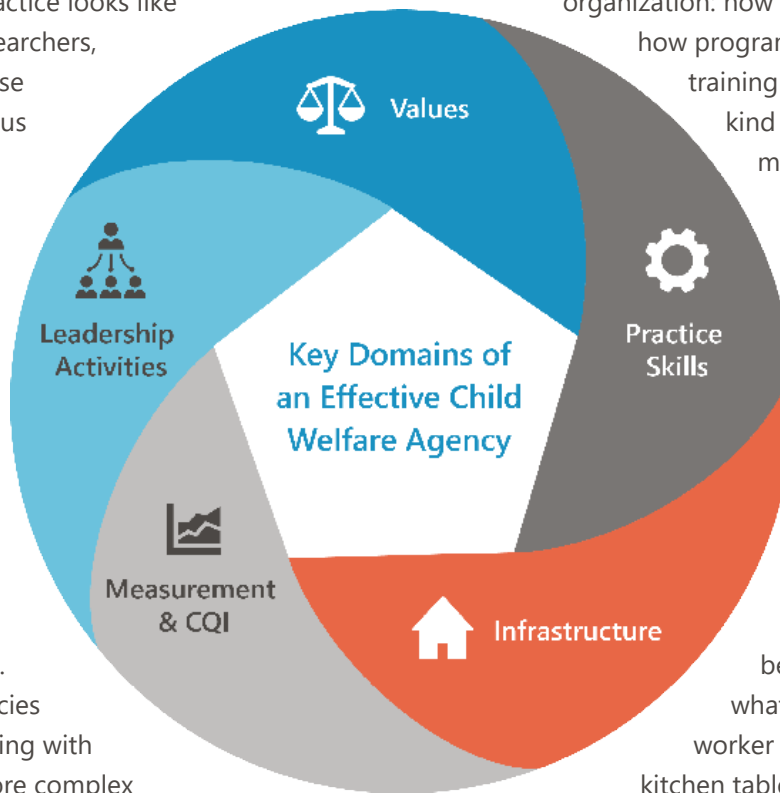
When we see child welfare organizations that work well, we often see sets of different activities

and organizational functions aligned together in a coherent way. The diagram below helps to illustrate this alignment.

An effective child welfare organization begins with a set of core **values** that drive everything in the organization: how families are treated, how programs are set up, the training staff receive, and the kind of outcomes that are measured. Staff need to know what these values are, supervisors need to supervise to them, and managers need to manage to them.

The next thing we look for is **practice**—the work that brings those values to life. If an organization values being family-centered, what happens when a worker sits down at a family's kitchen table? If an organization values being evidence-based, what does assessment of its clients involve? How do staff make critical decisions? If an organization values a commitment to diversity, how does that play out in a family team meeting with a multiracial family? Practice needs to make values tangible.

Next is **infrastructure**. In cities, infrastructure includes roads and bridges, hospitals and schools. In child welfare organizations, infrastructure includes





things like policy, procedures, supervision, family team meetings, electronic case management systems, and the courts. Infrastructure is rarely exciting to talk about, but it is essential. It helps shape organizational processes. It makes some things possible and other things harder or impossible. Good infrastructure is necessary to achieving good practice. And still, that's not enough.

How do we know that any of this is working? That's where **measurement and CQI** efforts come in. At CRC, we talk a lot with organizations about "managing by data." This means measuring key outcomes and using that information to guide the organization's growth and development. Measurement of organizational processes tells us whether the infrastructure and practice are doing what they are supposed to do. Measurement is key for any effective organization, but it must be aligned with values, practice, and infrastructure.

Last is **leadership**. Leadership needs to align with everything mentioned above. Agency leaders are not just the people at the top of an

organizational chart; leadership is anyone who can help make these connections. To do this, leaders need to understand the role of values, practice, infrastructure, and measurement. They need to ensure that new innovations, implementation, and overall functioning are coherent across these domains.

When CRC works with child welfare agencies, we often see well-intentioned efforts to make changes. These system improvement efforts succeed when they align values, practice, infrastructure, measurement, and leadership. When that happens, both the organization and everyone it touches benefits. When new changes are fragmented, they fail, and the organization and its clients suffer.

If you are a part of a child welfare agency or work with one, think about your organization. How well are these organizational functions aligned in your agency? Where is there fragmentation? Look for places to improve these connections. This will lead to better-functioning organizations and the improved outcomes about which we all care so much.

Learn More

For more information on how to make your agency more effective, contact Phil Decter, Interim Director of Child Welfare, at (800) 306-6223 or pdecter@nccdglobal.org.