Child Protective Services: reform and child well-being

Hennepin County Health and Human Services

August 2018
Reducing the need for child protective services

At the center of our work at Hennepin County is the duty to care for our most vulnerable. For the past several years, too many of our children have experienced crisis, trauma and loss.

Since 2015, reports of alleged child maltreatment have increased 16 percent. We have struggled to keep up with the work of investigating each of these reports to keep kids safe.

Child maltreatment is a problem that has multiple roots – poverty, domestic violence, mental illness and chemical addiction – in families and in our society. We know that incidents of maltreatment will continue to increase unless we change our approach from reactive to proactive.

We are well on our way toward flipping the switch on child well-being. Rather than working on our own to try to fix families after a crisis, we are working with families and with our communities to prevent the crisis – and trauma – from occurring.

We hope you will join us.

Jennifer DeCubellis, Deputy County Administrator
Health and Human Services
Child Protective Services

Hennepin County Health and Human Services
August 2018

Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our challenges</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our opportunities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the child protection process</td>
<td>3–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early identification, intervention and prevention</td>
<td>5–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disparities and racial disproportionality</td>
<td>7–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended families and communities</td>
<td>9–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff well-being</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding ourselves accountable</td>
<td>12–13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Well-being Advisory Committee</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our challenges

Several factors led us to where we are now. Significant budget cuts during the last decade reduced staffing and left us unprepared to handle increasing numbers of child protection reports. Just since 2015, reports of alleged child maltreatment have increased 16 percent, to almost 20,500 in 2017. Increasing numbers have severely strained our child welfare system as we work to investigate each of these reports and keep kids safe.

Reports to Hennepin County child protection with allegations of chronic and severe use of drugs and alcohol tripled from 2015 to 2017. Last year, for the first time, parental drug abuse became the most common reason children were removed from their homes.

Changes to state laws that define maltreatment have contributed to increasing numbers of cases referred for investigation, and increased numbers of children removed from their parents’ care.

Primary removal condition for youth entering out-of-home placement

- Parental drug use
- Alleged neglect
- Alleged physical abuse
- Alleged sexual abuse
- Parental alcohol abuse
- Other

2015

2017

↑ 34% Reports warranting investigation from 2015 to 2017

↑ 37% Children in out-of-home placement since 2015 and our greatest cost driver

↑ 207% Investigations with allegations of chronic and severe use of alcohol/controlled substances

↑ 30% Investigations with allegations of prenatal exposure to a controlled substance
Our opportunities

Guided by the work of the Hennepin County Child Protection Oversight Committee, the Governor’s Task Force on the Protection of Children, and our self-initiated studies of our work, we are adopting a strengths-based, proactive approach, tailored to prevent child abuse and neglect from happening in the first place. Several priorities inform our work:

1. Early identification and intervention
   We are partnering with other government entities and the private sector to identify and help families before they enter the child protection system.

2. Racial disparities and racial disproportionality
   We are working to address disparities in our community, and we are aware that race and racism contribute to family crisis.

3. The role of relatives and other loving adults
   We are calling on relatives, teachers, coaches and friends to help kids and their families in their time of need.

4. Staff well-being
   We are investing in our workers to ensure that they have the time, the resources and the support to do their work to keep kids safe.
The decision to open a child protection case is not made alone

There’s a whole circle of concerned adults that have the child’s well-being at heart and affect key decisions in the complex process of determining what happens in a child protection case:

- Neighbors, family and community members who know the child
- Mandated reporters such as teachers, clergy and health care workers
- Law enforcement officers who observe threats to child safety
- Social workers involved in the child’s life in another capacity
- State-appointed guardians who can make recommendations to the court
- Judges who make the final legal decision on placement and case plan conditions

Child protection is everyone’s responsibility
Understanding the child protection process

The child protection system, unfortunately, is too often represented with misinformation. But it’s our responsibility to be clear and transparent with the community about how and when reports move to investigations, and about those situations that result in children being removed from their parents’ care.

Intake

Social workers at a 24-7 call center gather information as reports come in. State laws define the strict legal criteria that guide screeners as they decide whether the allegation should go to investigation. About half of reports are “screened in” for investigation.

Assessment

Social workers gather facts to evaluate children’s safety, decide whether they can substantiate allegations of maltreatment, and determine whether the family needs protective services.

Reports that allege credible child endangerment must be “screened in” and investigated.

During this process, investigators try to predict the risk of future maltreatment and assess the family’s ability to protect their kids.

Case management

The family’s social worker forms a case management workgroup to ensure the child’s safety. The workgroup includes parents and siblings or other children in the home – and can include other important adults such as grandparents or a school social worker.

Out-of-home placement

When it is not safe for children to be with their parents, they may be removed from the home. Out-of-home placement options could include shelter care, relative foster care or non-relative foster care.

Child Protection’s goal is to help parents become stable so their children can return safely to their care.
We have learned
A crisis-driven response is not enough to meet families’ needs

Our goal, to help families become healthy so they don’t need child protection intervention, will require us to develop completely new approaches.

To identify families at risk and help stabilize them before they need child protection, we must leverage public health interventions such as home visits to at-risk families and substance abuse prevention initiatives.

Nationally, child abuse and neglect affect more than 1 million children every year and cost our nation $220 million every day.

– Prevent Child Abuse America

Kids in limbo

We continue to have more children entering than exiting foster care. Children are spending more time in out-of-home care than they did in the past. As a result of the lag in finding a permanent caregiving solution – with their parents or an adoptive family – and new cases continuing to come into the system, the total number of children in out-of-home placement continues to rise.

Out-of-home placement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of children: foster care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td><img src="chart-image1" alt="Bar chart showing out-of-home placement in 2015" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td><img src="chart-image2" alt="Bar chart showing out-of-home placement in 2016" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td><img src="chart-image3" alt="Bar chart showing out-of-home placement in 2017" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

0 300 600 900 1200 1500

- Children leaving out-of-home placement
- Children entering out-of-home placement
We are responding

Early identification, intervention and prevention work

We believe that a more holistic approach will allow us to help families find a better path and prevent a crisis.

Prevention

Worked with public health to align existing programs – from nutrition to childhood development – with a new family health service area dealing with maternal, child and early developmental issues.

Early identification and intervention

Expanded our in-house Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP) to help at-risk families with job and parenting support, mental health services, domestic abuse resources, transportation and basic needs.

Child protection

Began offering a developmental assessment for children from birth to 6 who have entered out-of-home placement. In 2017, 446 were screened, and 85 of those children were referred for evaluation.

Ongoing service and supports

Hired a new Public Health manager who is developing a seamless continuum of services for children in the child welfare and child protection systems.
We have learned

Issues that can lead to abuse often correlate to poverty and racial disparities

Residents experience disparities in economics
Too many Hennepin County families are living in poverty, and the numbers tell a story of racial disproportionality.

Hennepin County residents who live below the poverty line

15.9%
Hennepin County children live in poverty

34.1%
African American population

26.2%
American Indian population

18.3%
Multiracial population

7.4%
White/Caucasian population

The stress of poverty can debilitate parents’ ability to care for their children.

While many residents enjoy and benefit from Hennepin County’s nationally recognized high quality of life, we recognize stark disparities – particularly for our residents of color and our American Indian population. Poorer outcomes in education, employment, health, housing, income, justice, transportation and child well-being impair many of our residents.

Poverty disproportionately affects American Indian families and families and children of color, who also are disproportionately involved in the child protection system.

When parents are constantly under stress, when they struggle to feed and clothe their children, they can become anxious, depressed, fearful and overwhelmed.*

Research shows that families living on incomes at or below $15,000 a year are 22 times more likely to experience child maltreatment, compared to families making $30,000 or more. Increasing a low-income mother’s economic supports reduced the probability of her child being removed from her care by 79 percent. (Children’s Defense Fund)

*Joy Duva and Sania Metger, “Addressing Poverty as a Major Risk Factor in Child Neglect, Protecting Children”) 2016 American Community Survey

African American children
4 times
more likely to be involved in a child protection report

American Indian children
12 times
more likely to be involved in a child protection report
We have tools to build families’ self-reliance and address effects of generational poverty and historical trauma. Hennepin County is committed to working across departments throughout the organization and with our partners to reduce systemic disparities in the domains, programs and initiatives in which we have direct influence.

**Increasing self-reliance**

- Increased staffing of our in-house Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP) unit has reduced the wait for services from three months to a couple of business days.

**Addressing racial disproportionality**

- Two new community engagement managers help build relationships, trust and transparency with African American and American Indian stakeholders.

- Staff referrals to cultural navigators, a project of the African American Collaborative on Child Protection, are helping families understand the complex child protection system, address barriers and advocate for themselves and their children.

- Data metrics provide reports to monitor racial disproportionality and disparities in the decision-making points in the life of a child protection case.

- Child Protection’s partnership with be@school, Hennepin County’s anti-truancy and criminal justice diversion program, has resulted in 15 percent fewer cases referred for educational neglect last year.

- With recent hires, 40 percent of our social workers are from communities of color.

- Ongoing conversations and mandated reporter trainings with the NAACP help us address the connection between people’s racial biases and systemic disproportionality in the reporting system.

- Staff are working on building critical thinking, shared accountability, mutual ownership, cultural competence and community engagement, using KVC’s Safe and Connected™ Consultation and Information-Sharing Framework.

**Child welfare disproportionately serves African American and American Indian children**

Though families from any socioeconomic group can become involved in the child protection system, we see disproportionate numbers from specific demographic groups and underrepresentation of Caucasian families.

**Racial breakdown of children in Hennepin County**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian / Pacific Islander</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown / other</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Racial breakdown of children in the Hennepin County child protection system**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>American Indian</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Asian / Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Multiracial</th>
<th>Unknown / other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intakes</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case management</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-home placement</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Community partners can help us work on culturally competent solutions.
We have learned
Removing kids from their homes often causes more trauma

While our goal is to reunify families, there are some situations in which it’s just not safe for a child to return home. Children love their parents, and removing a child from a home is one of the most wrenching aspects of child welfare work, for children, parents and workers. All influencers in the decision must balance the potential trauma of separation with the potential harm of not separating.

These stakes are especially high for young children and children from indigenous communities and communities of color. As in other areas of child protection, African American and American Indian children represent a higher percentage of kids in out-of-home care. It is vital to respect children’s racial and ethnic heritage, and thoughtful placement in out-of-home care can help.

African American children
3.1 times more likely to experience out-of-home care in Minnesota

American Indian children
17.6 times more likely to experience out-of-home care in Minnesota

---

Child Protection placements in out-of-home care by age, 2015-2017

Child Protection placement occurrences in out-of-home care, 2015-2017
of days children spent in out-of-home care in 2017 were in placement with relatives, up from 44 percent in 2015.

The options for children separated from their parents include foster care, emergency shelter care, or placement with relatives or kin (other trusted adults).

The research is clear that placement with someone a child already knows can reduce behavior issues, support mental health, increase placement stability, and decrease a child’s risk of reentering the child welfare system.

Hennepin County appreciates our partners

The African American Collaborative on Child Protection’s Kinship Project helps African American relatives become licensed foster care providers and supports them as caregivers.

Little Earth Housing Community helps us support grandparents raising grandchildren, and provides violence prevention services and youth engagement in education and employment.
Of children who had only one social worker, 74.5 percent achieved timely permanency. This percentage dropped to 17.5 percent if the child had two social workers.*

*Flower, McDonald and Sumski, 2005

A competent and caring social worker can make the difference between success and failure for a family in crisis.

An examination of our systems and processes in child protection revealed that our staff have been overwhelmed and under-supported. They have too many cases to manage effectively. Working in isolation, they have been alone in making critical decisions with the families they serve.

Supervisors and team members also bear the hidden costs of extra work. This can lead to decreased efficiency, burnout, staff turnover and poorer case outcomes.

Staff turnover results in a significant cost to children and our overall system. We know that a worker who feels supported will provide better support for families. Workforce stability is critical.

We have learned

Staff well-being affects our response to families in crisis

As we increase our numbers, we are also working to ensure that staff have the support they need, from each other and from their supervisors.

- We increased our child protection workforce from 385 in 2015 to 647 in 2017.

- We are beginning to see improvements in the overall distribution of cases. Our target average caseload size is 10-12 cases for child protection.

- Staff retention in child protection also began to improve in 2017, averaging 91.4 percent across all areas.
Holding ourselves accountable

Improving performance and outcomes with stronger quality measures

In 2017, we formed a new governance team dedicated to developing and reporting critical performance measures. The team is charged with leading consistent and ongoing improvement to services, promoting a learning environment and supporting better outcomes for children.

Every month, the team reviews key performance and quality indicators in order to develop and implement further improvements. One immediate result of the team’s work is an innovative performance management tool to help staff, supervisors and managers monitor state and federal measures - in real time - to respond appropriately.

State and federal measures help the county monitor outcomes

The county met or exceeded the following state and federal standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>Performance standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relative care</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
<td>35.7% or greater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
<td>70% or greater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aging out of foster care</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
<td>70% or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanency: 12 months</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>40.5% or greater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanency: 12-23 months</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
<td>43.6% or greater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanency: 24 months</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>30.3% or greater</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The county continues to work on the following standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>Performance standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall timeliness</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseworker visits</td>
<td>75.7%</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>95% or greater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maltreatment recurrence</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>9.1% or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maltreatment in foster care</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>8.5 victimizations or less per 100,000 days in care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster care reentry</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>8.3% or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement stability</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.12 moves or less per 1,000 days in care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Holding ourselves accountable

Hennepin’s Child Well-being (CWB) Advisory Committee is a diverse group of experts representing law enforcement, the courts, public schools, government, foster parents, academics, evaluators, health care providers and Native American tribes. Their role is to advise staff and the County Board about child well-being services and strategies.

Child Well-being Advisory Committee 2016-2017

Mike Opat, Committee Chair
Hennepin County Commissioner
Susan Dragsten, Hennepin County Citizens Review Panel
Craig Enevoldson, Chief of Police, Brooklyn Park
Eric Fenner, Casey Family Programs
Anne Gearity, children’s mental health provider
Debbie Goettel, Hennepin County Commissioner
Carlton Jenkins, Superintendent, Robbinsdale Public Schools
Jim Koppel, Minnesota’s Human Services Assistant Commissioner, Department of Human Services
Gail Korst-Meyer, foster care provider
Traci LaLiberte, Center for the Advanced Study of Child Welfare
Anne McKeig, Associate Justice, Minnesota Supreme Court
Laurie Ohmann, Executive Vice President, Catholic Charities
David Piper, Judge, 4th Judicial District
Mike Scholl, Casey Family Programs
Alice Swenson, pediatrician
Darrell Thompson, Executive Director, Bolder Options
Lolita Ulloa, County Attorney’s Office
Stella Whitney-West, Executive Director
NorthPoint Health & Wellness
Noya Woodrich, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe
Tim Zuel, Professor of Social Work, University of Minnesota

It takes a whole community to protect children

When families come into the child protection system, they’re in need and in pain, often as a result of complex factors.

Government alone can’t solve the problem of child maltreatment. Our system isn’t designed to heal families – by law, it’s set up to prevent further harm to children.

But with continued support from individuals like you, communities and our non-profit partners, we can sustain our momentum. We can move from our current reactive, crisis-driven system to a proactive, strengths-based one that helps families avoid child protection in the first place.

Together, we can make Hennepin’s child welfare reform succeed.