



Child Welfare Workplace Culture

December 2019



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES



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Executive Summary

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) is a new, cabinet-level agency established to integrate services between early learning, child welfare and juvenile justice programming. The primary population-level outcomes goals for children, youth and families established by the department include measures in resilience, education and health. To deliver improvements in these outcomes, DCYF's workplace culture drives the agency's ability to meet and exceed the outcome goals.

The specific request for the report outlines the following:

“SSB 5955 Sec. 26 (2): The department shall provide a report on the department's current efforts to improve workplace culture to the relevant committees of the legislature in compliance with RCW 43.01.036 by December 1, 2019. The report must include results and activities related to the department's organizational change management initiatives, efforts related to the federal program improvement plan, and the department's existing peer support program.”

During the creation of DCYF, several cross-functional and program-specific work groups developed strategies to define and improve workplace culture. Some of these strategies include prior cultural assessments, workload studies, employee engagement survey data, internal investigations and human resources data and ongoing team and leadership development work.

This report includes a summary of past and current efforts focused on workplace culture. Some actions have already occurred and the agency will implement other recommendations in the coming 6-12 months or integrate through long-term planning. The primary goal of these efforts is to create an agency in which people feel supported, safe and proud, so that they in turn can support the children, youth and families served by DCYF.

Introduction

The merger of several state agencies into DCYF reached completion in July 2019 with the final addition of Juvenile Rehabilitation, the Office of Juvenile Justice and the Child Care Subsidy Program. The Children's Administration and the Department of Early Learning had previously merged with DCYF in July 2018. This merger combined not only functional aspects of each agency, but the workplace cultures inherent in each originating agency. Mergers of this type require intentional support efforts focused on organizational culture. While an ideal shared workplace culture can be espoused, the time and resources needed to change individual and organizational behavior to align with an ideal shared workplace culture spans across all levels of the organization and includes collaboration with agency partners and stakeholders.

DCYF has dedicated specific resources to build a positive, shared DCYF workplace culture in order to move the agency toward a supportive, safe and healthy workplace.

Agency-wide Initiatives

Organizational Change Management

The priority activities for Organizational Change Management within DCYF includes:

- Procurement of a consulting contract with Deloitte to support organizational change management, transition efforts and strategy development
- Procurement of an organizational change management competency license for change management curriculum and professional support through Prosci®
- Establishment of an Organizational Change Management Office within DCYF
- Development of an internal change management capacity within DCYF, and anticipates the Prosci change management certification of 45 agency practitioners in 2020 (with 1 percent of DCYF's approximate staff count being newly trained change management practitioners each year thereafter).
- Creation of a dashboard or system to collect, measure and analyze change management efforts
- Alignment and support of organization development efforts
- Initiation of culture focus groups to include DCYF employees, agency partners and community members to inform the long-term strategy for improving DCYF workplace culture

Office of Innovation, Accountability and Alignment

The priority activities within the Office of Innovation, Accountability and Alignment (OIAA) related to organizational change management have included foundational processes that will drive organizational change, as well as ensure that DCYF measures the effectiveness of systems' change. This includes the following:

- Completion of the internal and external stakeholder work, along with research and examination of other major state initiatives, to create the nine population-level outcome goals for children, youth and families that will guide the work of the new agency (DCYF leadership approved these outcomes November 2018)
- Staffed and led an Integrated Services Workgroup, which worked for a year and made recommendations to agency leadership for integrating services across the newly formed agency in order to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. (these recommendations were completed January 2019)

- Worked with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to conduct an [organizational baseline assessment](#) (completed May 2019)
- Leading development and implementation of DCYF’s outcome-oriented performance-based contracting effort, which will help improve outcomes and collaboration with DCYF contractors
- Leading efforts toward integration of DCYF data across multiple systems, allowing reporting, analysis and research to meet the mandates of HB1661, and to better align our services across the continuum.
- Working with the Harvard Government Performance Lab to identify the key systems changes needed to enable more young children in the front end child welfare system to have access to high quality early learning
- Leading DCYF’s first agency-wide strategic plan, with a goal for completion by the end of April 2020

Workplace Investigations

DCYF initiated a new approach for work place investigations that is more employee-centric with increased built-in transparency and due process. An administrator, who works for the HR Director and closely with the DCYF Secretary, leads the Workplace Investigations Unit that supports this initiative. The unit consists of former child welfare staff with case management experience, and a record of success in child welfare and licensing subject matter expertise. The unit is commissioned to approach each investigation in a non-judgmental way, and subject matter expertise gives them an insider perspective on the high intensity workload of caseworkers and the emotional cost to all involved. In addition, having fieldwork experience gives the investigators credibility with child welfare and licensing staff.

When the unit receives a request for investigation from an appointing authority, they determine whether the supervisor has provided adequate counseling and training to the employee to help correct the issue. If the investigation is pursued, the employee is notified and counseled to involve their union representative. The Unit then performs a fair and thorough investigation¹. The investigation report is provided to the appointing authority within 45 business days, who then determines findings based upon evidence gathered. This process ensures that supervisors work alongside their staff and support them to correct issues before they rise to the level of disciplinary action.

The new approach does not apply to serious misconduct (e.g. sexual harassment, retaliation or discrimination). In these circumstances, an employee has autonomy to report issues directly to the Workplace Investigations Administrator who will in turn notify the agency chain of command, and then take appropriate action.

As a preventive measure, the unit provides all managers and supervisors with a Performance Plan triage tool, including coaching and counseling, to establish effective expectations and directive language to alter behavior and improve performance when needed. The unit also provides ongoing consultation support to managers and supervisors who need assistance in having crucial conversations with employees.

The Workplace Investigations Administrator monitors disciplinary actions statewide to ensure actions by appointing authorities are equitable. To date, results have shown consistent application of “just cause” by DCYF appointing authorities. In addition, pre-investigative remedies such as alternative assignments

¹ [Washington Federation of State Employees Collective Bargaining Agreement Article 27](#)

and home assignments are used sparingly. Complaints from employees involved in investigations are few.

Federal Performance Improvement Plan Efforts

The state of Washington participated in Round 3² of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) from April 2018 through September 2018. The Children’s Bureau published the results of Washington’s CFSR on Feb. 4, 2019. The results found Washington to be out of substantial conformity with the seven practice outcomes and four of the seven systemic factors. Based on the results, Washington State was required to develop a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). Using available administrative data³ to inform the process, DCYF engaged multiple audiences⁴ in problem identification, root cause analysis, and the development of goals, strategies and activities. Goals and strategies identified in the PIP are aligned and integrated with those included in the federal Court Improvement Plan (CIP), Permanency from Day One grant, and the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD) grant.

The focus on the specific, aligned communities of practice under the CIP and Permanency grants supports implementation, review and adjustment of interventions to expand and improve workplace culture. In turn, DCYF expects this will create statewide, sustainable change and improve the processes and provision of interventions and services to improve outcomes for children, youth and families. The identified goal areas and associated strategies are intended to strengthen and improve Washington’s core areas of practice. The goals are also intended to provide the supports needed to integrate and sustain necessary practice changes. DCYF has identified the following themes for our PIP, which are subject to approval by the Children’s Bureau:

- Competent and Supported Supervisory Workforce
- Safety Assessment and Case Planning
- Permanency
- Engagement with Children, Youth, Parents and Caregivers

DCYF submitted an initial PIP in June 2019 and has been working with the Children’s Bureau on revisions since then. The revision process will extend into December 2019 and DCYF expects to submit a final PIP for approval by Jan. 31, 2020. Once the PIP is approved, Washington has two years to complete its planned program improvement activities. Failure to meet expected targets for improvement may result in a fine of up to \$5.1 million. To meet expectations, it is critical that staff are supported and have manageable caseloads, allowing adequate time to engage with children and families in case planning and casework visits, and to participate in and provide quality supervisory conferences.

In addition, over the course of the next five years, under the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP), Washington will be re-evaluating its current practice model for redesign or relaunch. DCYF recognizes the importance of an effective practice model that is grounded in the values, principles, relationships,

² All 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico completed their first review by 2004 and their second review by 2010. For Round 3, states meeting certain criteria may conduct their own case reviews and case-specific interviews using the revised federal Onsite Review Instrument and Instructions, and submit the results to the Children’s Bureau in lieu of a more traditional review conducted in a one-week time frame. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cfsr_general_factsheet.pdf

³ Used data includes available administrative data, ongoing case review and CFSR data and information from statewide/local CQI and engagement activities.

⁴ Engaged audiences include, staff, leadership, Tribes, stakeholders and community partners.

approaches and techniques that support timely achievement of safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes. DCYF also recognizes the importance of providing the foundation to develop a more competent and supported workforce. A practice model that is trauma-informed, safety-focused, family-centered, culturally-competent and creates consistency and accountability in child welfare practice is foundational to our work. The areas of focus and strategies identified in the PIP will align with and support, key components of a practice model.

Existing Peer Support Program

In fall of 2006, the former Children's Administration (CA)⁵ launched a peer support program to help staff after some high profile fatalities with significant media exposure, a staff assault incident and the recognition that staff need support after exposure to these types of traumatic events. At that time, there was no designated funding for the Peer Support Team (PST) program/unit, coordinator/trainer or staff, or funding to design and develop a tracking system. This is still the current state of the peer support program. The program relies on staff to volunteer their time and for a volunteer staff member to conduct the necessary coordination and support functions along with their regular work.

A statewide workgroup was convened. After much research, the workgroup combined pieces of the Washington State Patrol and Toronto Children's Aid Society's (TCAS) models. TCAS provided training and consultation to the Peer Support Staff.

The PST was made up of a trainer/coordinator and CA staff volunteers who received special training to provide critical incident support after a traumatic event, including training in critical incident debriefing. The PST members represented all areas of the state, urban and rural, and every office size. The PST was diverse and represented different ages, genders, ethnicity, race and life and work experience. The purpose of the PST was to provide prompt debriefing to child welfare staff within 48 hours of a critical or serious incident. A charter and protocol were established. The mission of PST is to:

- Provide support after critical incidents
- Connect peers with other peers
- Organize events that build staff resilience
- Offer secondary trauma education and resources
- Build a culture of support among staff

The PST members conducted statewide presentations on the establishment of the program, including information on how to request peer support. A pamphlet on the PST was provided to statewide offices and peer support information was made available to staff on the CA intranet.

Peer support is a confidential and voluntary program. It allows staff to talk about the event, lessen the impact of the trauma and move toward the recovery process. Peer support is also available for groups of staff based on need. Staff who are impacted by a traumatic incident, which may cause psychological, emotional, cognitive and physical reactions, may experience loss of control, isolation and interference with their ability to function day-to-day. Peers, who have an understanding of the job and its complex, sensitive nature, can provide a compassionate forum for staff to debrief traumatic events.

⁵ Effective July 1, 2018, DCYF replaced the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Children's Administration (CA) as the state agency responsible for child welfare.

As of 2013, staff no longer have to rely on their supervisor to initiate peer support, as they did when the program was first established. Child welfare workers or supervisors can send an email to the PS email address, which is located on the DCYF Intranet. Peer support is available to staff that experience a critical incident at work and for any incident that critically affects them outside of work. Many of our staff report that it is difficult to leave the job at home and it sometimes carries over into their personal lives, and vice versa. There are times when an employee experiences a loss or a trauma outside of work that affects them at work. The purpose of peer support is to provide a “whole person” approach because we know the work is difficult.

Peer Support Gaps and Challenges

There is currently no dedicated funding for the program, which is staffed by volunteers who take on the role of peer support in addition to regular job duties. This funding gap also limits the program both in staffing levels for training and the resources needed for the training to provide peer support. This limitation affects the quality and on-going training for volunteers (there are approximately 57 volunteers), and creates barriers for volunteers to travel to staff that are in need of peer support. There are times when the peer support volunteer needs to travel across the state. There is no special funding for peer support travel. The program relies on regional administrators and agency leadership to provide travel funds on an “ad-hoc” basis. However, there is no guarantee that a region will have funds to allow a peer support volunteer to travel. When that occurs, the peer support program coordinator tries to find another volunteer and if no one is available then the requesting employee is told that there are no volunteers available. The lack of funds also creates barriers for offering training to staff. Current peer support volunteers do this work on an “as available basis” so it creates gaps in being able to provide timely support to staff that request it. Under this staffing model, there are times when a PST member is not available and peer support is not provided. The peer support coordinator will let the employee’s supervisor know that the program was unable to find a volunteer to support their employee, which means accessing other resources like services through health insurance or the Employee Assistance Program.

There is no formal tracking system for peer support and therefore, no data on the annual number of peer support requests. The numbers in the chart below represent the number of times the volunteer peer support coordinator was able to match a peer support volunteer with an employee requesting support. Total numbers of peer support completed annually per region is the only data consistently collected since 2013.

Year	Total Peer Support (Statewide)
2013*	43
2014	No Data
2015	13
2016	13
2017	54
2018	67
2019 (as of November)	45

*indicates the year that the program transitioned away from employees needing supervisor approval to access peer support.

Conclusion

Building a positive organizational culture is an outcome of several factors within the organization. The key to a successful transformation of any organizational culture begins with a strong plan and leadership support to implement change. DCYF possesses both of these components. Immediate changes implemented by DCYF Secretary, Ross Hunter, include policy changes to workplace investigations. The focus of the change is to reduce the unnecessary use of the investigations process as an approach to employee discipline. Additional immediate changes include an agency-wide directive to reduce policy complexity in order to create a more supportive work environment.

The future of DCYF depends on employees participating in improving their work. Improvement ideas and integrated teams will assist in making organizational transformation a reality.