

Is resistance to change impeding child welfare system modernization?



Resistance to change is a common and familiar obstacle raised by child welfare agencies embarking on a Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) transformation. While the concern is very real, this article posits that:

01

Child welfare staff have time and again demonstrated the capacity to successfully navigate enormous change.

02

Carefully planned organizational change management (OCM) efforts that include staff as agents for change can make a significant positive impact on both the quality and acceptance of a state's modernization.

03

Child welfare agencies will be better positioned for CCWIS success by first embracing modernization as an opportunity to undertake needed programmatic changes that center families at their core before building new technology.



Harness a demonstrated track record of navigating change

Child welfare agencies have undergone an enormous amount of change throughout their histories. In the past five years alone, child welfare professionals have navigated major federal legislation, a global pandemic, and a national movement to right historical inequities.



Serving families during the pandemic

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, child welfare professionals had to quickly adapt and innovate in order to continue to protect and support families and children amid social distancing, lockdowns, school closures, heightened family pressures, operational limitations, a prevalent digital divide, regulatory challenges, and more. Many child welfare staff transitioned to working remotely and developed new ways of engaging with and supporting families and children, including virtual client visits, medical and mental health appointments, and court hearings. Many of the adaptations have been incorporated into child welfare practices postpandemic due to their positive impact on operations and outcomes.¹



Elevating the role of prevention and supporting kin

In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First) was enacted, marking a significant shift in practice for many child welfare agencies and workers. Family First focuses on proactively approaching child welfare through the lens of what families need to thrive together, elevating the role of

prevention and formally acknowledging the importance of kinship relationships. It has required child welfare agencies that had not already done so to adapt and shift resources and strategies to prioritize prevention, implement evidenced-based preventive services, evolve service-delivery models, invest in training and data systems, and build partnerships with community-based organizations to deliver services to children and families.²

The 2023 final rule permitting states to set separate licensing requirements for kinship families offers tremendous promise for maintaining family connections while also bringing complex policy and practice changes for child welfare agencies.³ While it is too soon to know exactly how it will improve outcomes in the long term, states have the opportunity use the final rule as a springboard to improve practice, place more youth with kin, and provide the financial support to help those families thrive.



Addressing disparities

It has long been known that children and families of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system and, while in the system, have lower and slower rates of reunification. In 2021, Black children accounted for 14 percent of the general child population but 22 percent of the foster care population; White children accounted for 49 percent of the general child population but only 43 percent of its foster care population.⁴ While in care, Black children have longer lengths of stay and reunification with their families is less likely than for White children in foster care.⁵

The past few years have added new urgency to addressing disparities. While this work is far from finished, child welfare agencies are addressing disparities by deepening engagement with those with lived experience, investing in concrete supports, and shifting service delivery upstream to meet the needs of children, families, and communities.



Continuing to serve families despite fewer resources and staff

Many states are experiencing shortages of child welfare staff, and vacancies and turnover have accelerated since 2020. This has meant higher caseloads and more work for the staff who remain and has pushed states to consider how to better attract and retain their workforce. Many states have responded by increasing caseworker salaries, reducing caseloads, deepening preservice and annual training, and taking other steps to improve working conditions for their staff.⁶



Child welfare leaders whose organizations still rely on legacy technology feel great urgency to modernize the systems they use every day for case management and reporting. But with all this recent change, it is understandable that many child welfare professionals may feel like they are drowning and, as a result, may appear resistant to their agency's CCWIS transformation.

Instead of allowing this perceived resistance to change to slow modernization, child welfare agency leaders can instead proactively harness their staff's demonstrated ability to navigate change to help drive their CCWIS modernization forward. By drawing on past successes, agencies can cultivate organizational agility and resilience, instill confidence, empower staff, and apply acquired lessons learned to the advancement of CCWIS modernization.



A strong track record of embracing change

Serving families during the pandemic

- Four of the five states and eight of the ten county agencies that participated in a 2021 Government Accountability Office study planned to continue offering some or all of the virtual services developed during the pandemic, citing increased participation, time savings for both families and agency staff, and even citing some examples of higher-quality family visits.⁷

Elevating the role of prevention and supporting kin

- Michigan has been recognized as the first state to have its enabling kinship legislation certified by the Administration for Children and Families, serving as a model for other states implementing similar reforms to support kinship care.⁸
- Virginia has gone further to enact legislation that provides additional financial and other support to kinship families of children outside of state custody.⁹

Addressing disparities

- In 2021, New Jersey enacted legislation creating a statewide, universal home visiting program for newborns, offering a free home visit by nurses to all families with newborns.¹⁰
- Indiana's Family Preservation Services, which includes concrete support, is showing promise to prevent re-entry of children into foster care and keep families safe at home.¹¹

Continuing to serve families despite fewer resources and staff

- Child welfare caseworkers in Washington State achieved what could be as much as a 17 percent raise over the next two years.¹²
- The Oregon Department of Human Services is employing more trauma-informed approaches to training, which aligns with a 2021 Oregon State study looking at why some workers stay in the field, and that feeling appreciated by strong supervisory support and coworker relationships is key.¹³

Implement organizational change management

In an environment where there are fewer resources and staff to help carry agencies forward, it is easy for technology modernizations to become categorized as obstacles that child welfare staff must overcome. Child welfare leaders understand that without staff buy-in, their CCWIS transformation journey can be unpredictable and may lead to far higher costs in terms of time, staff, and financial resources. This is where OCM becomes critically important. A well-planned OCM strategy is key in enhancing the planning, development, user acceptance, and ultimate success of a CCWIS implementation.

According to insights derived from a KPMG client during a large scale transformation at a state Medicaid agency in 2019, following the implementation of an OCM strategy, 70 percent of employees reported a better understanding of their new role and 65 percent of employees went as far as to say they felt more confident working in the new technology. Additionally, 60 percent of employees noted they understood organizational redesign and system implementation efforts, as well as the impact to their teams, once the OCM strategy had been implemented.

OCM efforts begin with an assessment of the agency's ability and capacity for change, as well as an understanding of the current state before any new technology is built. This must be accompanied by a thorough understanding of all transformations across the organization which may include staff pain points, areas of resistance, and the need for additional support.

Research studies, as well as KPMG past technology implementations, indicate that it is highly effective to include change agents from both the business and information technology sides to market the system's benefits and drive the adoption and adaptation of the change. Involving change agents can improve the quality of several key areas, including but not limited to: defining requirements, governance, user acceptance, and envisioning a future state that aligns with the evolving needs of child welfare agencies and the children and families they serve. Thoughtful and timely OCM efforts can help child welfare leaders to mobilize, strengthen, and tap into these change agents at all stages of CCWIS development, from planning to go-live and beyond.

By implementing a well-designed organizational change management strategy that is rooted in the strengths of agency staff and links change to the agency's mission and purpose, child welfare agencies can turn the "resistance to change" mantra on its head and create true change agents within their workforce and stakeholder community.



Embrace modernization as an opportunity to implement essential programmatic changes

The move from Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) to CCWIS carries with it the promise of transforming the way states serve children, families, and communities. With a modular and configurable approach to CCWIS system modernization, states have a tremendous opportunity to center families at the core of the work, redesigning programs around the belief that the services for children and families must engage, involve, support, and strengthen them. And programmatic transformations, not technology, must lead. To ensure that CCWIS effectively supports the agency's real work in 2024 and beyond, states should prioritize business process redesign up front before embarking on CCWIS implementation. This proactive and family-first approach lays a solid foundation upon which new CCWIS technology can truly drive meaningful improvements and help maximize the benefits of CCWIS for all.

How KPMG can help

KPMG is working with several states to support change, both for CCWIS modernizations and for other major health and human services transformations aimed at aligning resources, practices, and policies to support the real needs of children, families, communities, and the child and family serving workforce. Our teams of state and local consultants understand child welfare and the unique challenges each state faces. We can bring strategic insights, cutting-edge solutions, and extensive experience in business process redesign, CCWIS planning, OCM, cost allocation planning, program implementation, data quality and governance, and more, to help guide your team successfully through its most critical transformation efforts.



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