



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

What leadership strategies have advanced transformation in the District of Columbia?

Q&A with Brenda Donald, Director, District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency¹

In January 2017, Brenda Donald stepped down from her position as the District of Columbia's deputy mayor for Health and Human Services to serve as the director of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) for the third time. We asked Director Donald to share her thoughts about what is required to lead the complex work of child protection, as well as her vision for a comprehensive, community-driven approach to preventing child maltreatment and supporting families.

Q: What inspired you to return to CFSA for the third time?

I care deeply about this work, which, for me, has always been about social justice and equity. At an agency like CFSA, we can apply research and knowledge on the ground to help the kids and families who need support. Because of its size, available resources, and cross-systems partnerships, D.C. is a place where you can truly reform the system and improve the lives of thousands of families.



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Q: How do you address diversity, equity, and inclusion on your team?

I love what I do and hire smart people who are equally passionate about the work. Our staff at all levels of the agency reflect the families we serve, and represent diversity in age, race, experience, and background. I see myself as a coach, and I'm clear about my vision, expectations, and ability to get the resources they need to do their jobs. In some cases, that means additional staff or money; in others, it means hands-on assistance in developing their skills. My focus is to systematically build the team and infrastructure that is necessary to continue this work, no matter who is sitting in this chair. I network with Schools of Social Work to build the capacity of the agency. Caring for employees is an important part of the work, so I created a position focused on employee well-being and community service.

Q: Do you have any advice for new child welfare leaders?

It is important to build the expertise of the next generation of child welfare leaders. We need to help them get up to speed as quickly as possible and then buffer and support them when bad things happen. It's really important for new leaders to:

- Acknowledge that there is good work that has been done before you stepped in. **Take stock, assess what's working, and identify the current and near future projected threats and opportunities.**
- Have a **strategic framework** that provides a clear outline of what needs to be done, how to get there, and a communication plan for engaging internal and external stakeholders.

- **Remember you can't do it alone**, and identify the important stakeholders who will help you do this work: (1) staff, (2) political stakeholders (including media and advocates), and (3) constituents.
- Find out who your big detractors are and who listens to them so that you can **build trust** before something bad happens and everything caves in.

When I became secretary of the Maryland Department of Human Resources, I had no political alliances, didn't understand the legislative structure, and had no history with the governor. And there were 7,000 employees all over the state, so I knew it was important to develop an entry strategy. I mapped out my first 90 days so that I could tour the entire state. I visited county offices to bridge the divide with the state office and hosted listening sessions to learn what they needed from the state office. I was exhausted but the benefits were huge. When the legislative session started, I met with legislators, went to hearings and City Council meetings, and presented our budget. After all of those foundational steps, we were able to create our framework, Place Matters.

Q: How did you develop D.C.'s strategic plan?

Most strategic planning processes take too long, as there is a tendency to spend time getting way down in the weeds contemplating specific words and mission statements. **I have no tolerance for big long processes because kids can't wait.** Strategic plans become stale soon after they're written. The feds require child protection agencies to create five-year plans, but it's impossible to anticipate every crisis that may arise between now and then. For example, five years ago we could not have predicted the opioid crisis

How do we use these big systems to give families a chance and let kids be kids?

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that is devastating communities, or the impact of new immigration policies.

While I do think very strategically, my plans are more tactical. Several years ago, CFSA was engaged in a strategic planning process and I grew frustrated. What we needed was a framework that we could readily share with people. Those outside the system are not necessarily child welfare experts who understand the acronyms and other terms we use. **We needed to talk about our vision and mission in a way that people could engage with.** That's how we developed the [Four Pillars framework](#), in partnership with our stakeholders, and we routinely share our progress with the community.

Q: How have you helped staff at all levels connect to the Four Pillars?

The Pillars make sense because they represent the core functions of child protection. We are intentional in our communication that **everything has to be part of the framework** – materials, testimony before City Council, budget presentations, recruitment strategies – everything is connected to the plan. When we solicit requests for providers to procure prevention services, we explain that this is part of our strategy to narrow the front door. Internally, at our management team meeting, we noticed that our agendas were just a loose collection of things, so we reorganized them to align with the Four Pillars.

We also instituted the Four Pillars Heroes, which are annual awards for achieving benchmarks tied to our [scorecard](#). We set targets, look at data, and

determine if a unit or individual social worker has met or exceeded the targets. This process is not about making friends; it is about performance, and we make a big deal out of it.

Q: Are there other ways that you celebrate success?

After two years of celebrating the Four Pillars Heroes, we had a lot of good practice examples that we wanted to reinforce. There are caseworkers who may never address an entire scorecard measure, but they go above and beyond by moving a kid to permanency more quickly through the early identification of kin and overcoming any number of other barriers. These celebrations happen throughout the year and are a way to share stories of success and applaud the caseworkers. Anyone can nominate a colleague for this award and the leadership team determines the winners. These awards are not just for social workers; we also recognize the administrative and facilities staff. The awardees receive a medal that they wear for the day and participate in a celebratory lunch.

Q: How do you approach engagement with partners?

We are strategic in how we engage with constituents, community groups, and other government agencies. Our approach includes:

- Setting up clearly articulated framework for our strategic stakeholder engagement.
- Hiring people with lived experience.

Do your homework. Know what the big issues are, who the key players are, and who can help or hurt you. Make yourself totally available and go to them. Don't wait for them to come to you.

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- Recognizing that we are the agency, not the entire child welfare system. Families are complex and are often served by multiple agencies.
- Being clear about our respective roles and how we are all working on behalf of families. It is counterproductive to work in silos and leaders throughout the district, including the mayor and City Council, all value collaboration. They have supported legislation that allows data sharing across agencies because we have a shared value in the integration of systems for families.

Q: Why do you message CFSA as the child welfare agency and not the system?

If you look at the Four Pillars graphic, you will see that we were intentional about the platform that the pillars sit on: the child welfare agency, system, and community. We used this framework to re-engage our stakeholders and community members, including those who had been distrustful. If you don't build good will, people only know about the negative stories that they have heard.

A few years ago, we had a high-profile case where a child went missing. The child's family was involved with both the homeless services system and CFSA. The three leading advocacy organizations, who had badmouthed us in the past, each reached out to me independently to say that they didn't want the story to pull the rug out from under us. They were prepared to support us in the media, which showed me that our relationships across the system were in

a whole different place. We still disagree sometimes, but we are having important conversations now. They saw that we were working with stakeholders and being transparent, and they didn't want things to come crashing down.

Q: How does Family First legislation support your vision?

We continually seek ways to remove the barriers that keep parents from successfully caring for their children. Our work with community collaboratives for over 20 years has allowed us to do that. We have successfully reduced the number of children in foster care based on our values. We believe that **most families want to take care of their kids; stuff just gets in the way. If we can successfully support and stabilize families, everyone is better off.**

Prior to Family First, we had a Title IV-E waiver focused on prevention. When our waiver was winding down, we saw this new legislation as an opportunity to continue our work. We already had everyone around the table and we decided to get together, and create a plan that is not just for the feds, but also meaningful for D.C.

The workgroup's charge was to think strategically. We had to understand where families live and what they need, what services we currently provide, and what more we need to do. So we start with families that are coming to the attention of the child welfare

One of the most popular awardees was the fleet operations team. They were nominated because every time someone needs a car it is there, and the system works. This is an example that proves the point that it takes everyone to support the front line.

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system, since imminent risk is in the legislation, and then build out as far from that front door as possible.

We also looked further upstream to see if we could fill other gaps. This process resulted in [Families First D.C.](#), which includes family success centers that are supported through local funding to round out our plan. We were able to put this plan together quickly because we:

- Had a lot of agreement about what we should focus on.
- Received technical assistance and guidance to make sure we were interpreting the law correctly.
- Have a rich history using evidence-based practices. We were building a portfolio funded through Medicaid and could go to partners who were at the table and say, “Ok, let’s agree on the programs that are likely to be in the clearinghouse but may need additional spots or priority for families in the target population through Family First.”

- Had a history of prevention work and an infrastructure to build on.
- Have very few children in group homes, so the requirements around qualified residential treatment providers were not an issue for us.

Q: What is your hope for the future?

We hope that families see us as a resource. Of course, families have mixed experiences with us and, in some cases, we have been the bad guys. I initially didn’t want Families First DC to be housed in CFSA because I thought there would be negative connotations. But the reaction from the community has been positive. Instead of going to the mayor to ask why CFSA is leading the effort, they are saying, “We’re so glad that you’re doing this and we are a part of it.” **We have shifted from being an agency that is focused only on foster care to an agency that supports families.** That’s what I hope continues.

1 Adapted from interview with Brenda Donald on January 8, 2020.

P 800.228.3559
P 206.282.7300
F 206.282.3555

casey.org | KMResources@casey.org

