



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

How can child welfare leaders manage through crisis while **maintaining momentum toward transformation?**

Q&A with Ann Silverberg Williamson, Executive Director, Utah Department of Human Services¹

Child welfare leaders across the country face crisis on a routine basis, including challenges resulting from child maltreatment fatalities, natural disasters, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Ann Silverberg Williamson served as secretary of the Louisiana Department of Social Services during the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and executive director of the Utah Department of Human Services during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this Q&A, she shares her strategies and lessons learned from managing operations during major crises, while also holding true to her values and maintaining momentum toward transformation.

When it comes to responding to a crisis, where do you start?

This will not be surprising: I believe the best place to start is with established relationships. It is critically important to recognize that intentional and trusting relationships are the currency of an effective and efficient crisis response. The intensity of expectations that are upon leaders in these circumstances, and the



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urgency with which decision-making needs to occur, require that leaders consult with their trusted advisors to have confidence that they are acting with the best of intentions. During a crisis, you cannot determine the right answer by reading a book, and the risks of making the wrong decision are high. But it all boils down to knowing when good enough is good enough, and knowing that your decisions are driven by your values. It is never a faulty investment to take time developing trusting relationships and partnerships. I surround myself with courageous and committed individuals who fundamentally believe in humanitarian good will and are devoted to the well-being of all.

Disasters and crises, while consuming, can also be freeing. When there is devastating loss, there is new space to embolden leaders, even amidst the grief. Rather than maintain status quo in addition to rebuilding or recovering from a crisis, the re-ordering event provides a clean-slate opportunity to leave behind what has hindered progress or has been distracting to aspirational efforts. After Hurricane Katrina and during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no denying the significant large-scale changes expected of us, and that was in many ways to the benefit of people and the betterment of our services. When everyone has a sense of urgency and is running in a common rhythm of prioritizing critical action, testing new ideas, and generating innovation, leaders are able to think differently. At some point, you also need to look back and determine how the combined experiences, pre- and post-disaster, will influence your approach for the future. How does the crisis experience assist you in re-calibrating over the long term? How can the unencumbered commitment that you had to overcome a disaster also serve your “peace time” goals in keeping with your values?

How do you prioritize?

The decisions a leader makes during a time of crisis are intensely pressure-filled. Executive leaders are expected to be — and should be — champions for their constituency and their workforce, in addition to being accountable to the public. When there is a tremendous amount of need, as there is in a crisis, it is important to be thoughtful and conscientious

in determining when to go full throttle and exercise your advocacy to the furthest extent possible. Every unexpected development cannot warrant equal action. The wisdom to be discerning about what gets elevated as a top priority on behalf of your constituency makes a difference on how often and successfully these interests receive the desired attention — whether in the executive branch, the state Legislature, or the federal government — because you will not get everything.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we prioritized safety in a manner that was holistic. We recognized that the fundamentals of safety for human services meant centering our efforts on whole family connections: how to safely reduce barriers between individuals in our care with their relatives, and how to improve the practices and policies in support of such changes. We also maintained a persistent commitment amidst uncharted experiences to what we know works and what we know is right to achieve the outcomes we seek. If you keep that in mind, it is not complicated to stay the course.

How do your values show up in your approach as a leader?

It is an honor and a privilege to serve children and families. My approach comes from listening, investing time in learning, and leading with my values, which include making sure the voice of those with lived experience comes first and that systemic racism is addressed. Systems are not capable of caring about a family’s well-being, people are. Most ideally, the people are relatives, friends, neighbors, and community. The fear and reactive nature of child protection needs to be re-oriented, and I champion the many professionals within this workforce who want moms, dads, and extended family to be the safest caregiver for a child. This calls for bold humility within each of us and across our system. Bold because there is important work before us, and humble because there is much about how it’s been done to date that is not worth preserving, namely where practice has been disparately harmful to Black and American Indian children and families. I want to lead beside others who share the calling to influence all lives for the better. We have learned we have the greatest likelihood of

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succeeding in our goals when a clear focus on family strengthening is at the center, and all other actions are secondary.

What strategies have you found effective in managing through crisis?

The building blocks of my strategies are partially influenced by a military career father, a journalist mother, and a social work education. During my career, these disciplines have been put to the test as I hold myself to a high standard: Am I advancing the public trust in my work? I have found it beneficial to clearly establish my crisis leadership approach: first, an engaged and explicit governance structure; second, a battle rhythm for timely decision-making, action, and follow-up; and third, reliable team communication. Throughout each of these areas, facts and authenticity are critical, so seeking truth from the source is most beneficial. Investing the necessary time on tools that maintain consistency in the information received and shared has also been helpful.

Practicing self-care throughout is key. We hear so much about that, but it's more than talk. Leaders must be the model. The way you empower others to do their best work is to do your own best work. That means recognizing when you need to take time to rest, make space to let go, and know how and when to check

back in. Sometimes you need to “quiet the noise” to function at your highest capacity, both as an individual and as a leader, in order to think about the best course forward. Identify your sanctuaries — it is so critical to have the opportunity to be your best, whole self.

Early in the COVID-19 crisis, I asked department leaders to document the things they were not doing any more and did not want to do again. And perhaps more importantly, to identify some things they want to advance and believe the COVID crisis can be a catalyst for. There has been a fluidity of experiences across different divisions in Utah. The degree to which we have invested in foster care is something we are carefully thinking about and questioning. For example, why don't we have peer supports for birth families?

How important is cross-sector collaboration?

Very important. Engaging partners — including the courts, providers, and families — and maintaining their involvement in our decision-making is key. Pre-existing collaboration between human services and our medical community, including public health partners, was invaluable during the pandemic response.

Better outcomes, particularly during emergencies or in times of crisis, result from productive multi-sector work. In Utah, we were able to do this recently and



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very effectively as we prepared for and made shifts with the Family First Prevention Services Act, in addition to efforts throughout COVID-19, to engage across sectors. Knowing who the most effective partners were to advance various messages that engender trust and swift action was tremendously helpful. As we face pervasive racial injustice and inequity, inclusive and diverse perspectives are essential to shape our way forward. Community convening has long been a priority because when disaster comes — or when circumstances arise that could erode trust in one another — that will call upon healthy, well-established relationships.

How do you stay grounded in your values?

Our values include keeping children safe by honoring and strengthening their families, and using multi-disciplinary teaming for all decision-making. If we want our message to be about prevention and

transformation, we need to remedy this deep-rooted idea that child welfare saves children. The front door to family support should not be the child welfare hotline. There are so many community-based front doors.

We all need to be conscientious about supporting families. I care about children being safe and making sure they are cared for, and our communities need to aspire to ensuring all families have what they need. With time, be it new crises or competing agendas, distractions from our core values will arise. I encourage leaders to remain steadfast in the principles that guide you to this work and stay mindfully courageous in your prioritization of time, attention, and investments. It is human nature to revert from what is uncomfortable and demanding, and there is a strong pull to the familiar. But we need to hold ourselves accountable. We have to stay committed to a new path.

We are all on this journey together.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

1 Adapted from interviews on June 4, 2020, and Sept. 23, 2020. Williamson was executive director of Utah Department of Human Services at the time of these interviews. She currently is coordinated care and crisis response lead at Casey Family Programs.

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