



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

What does Family First mean for families and for child welfare systems?

Q & A with Beverly (BJ) Walker, director, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Q: You've been in leadership or management in human services and education for over 30 years. What do you see as the promise of the Family First Prevention Services Act?

A: I am a mother, a grandmother, a sister, a daughter. The only reason this work makes any sense to me is because I am those four roles all rolled up together. And because of these roles, it's important for me to help us find our way to vulnerable families earlier. Like others, I am ready to start pulling families out of the shallow end of the pool and stop waiting until they float to the deep end and wind up in a child welfare situation.

Today the child welfare business model is standing on a burning platform. Family First gives us a place to jump to, a narrative that is not about fear, fatality, and failure but about strengthening and supporting families before they need a child welfare intervention. This is not going to be a simple lift and shift. Too many forces are working against us. We're going to have to get very intentional about how we make the leap off this burning platform, such that the entire practice we're engaged in and the numbers associated with it look nothing like they look right now. We need lots of families engaged and lots of activities of support and



What does Family First mean for families and for child welfare systems?

strengthening, and very, very few families whose kids wind up having to be taken into protective custody.

Q: Can you say more about vulnerable families and our business model?

A: I don't know that we know who they are, or whether we will know them when we see them and know what to do when we reach them. There's an elephant in this child welfare room that we all exist in. Across this nation, states have spent more money; they've hired more caseworkers; they've privatized and then un-privatized the front line; they've convened task forces; they've put together blue ribbon panels; they've signed consent decrees that last for decades; they've swapped one super-star director for another. And yet the data still tells us a chilling tale: **we are living in a failing business model.**

Over the last five years, more kids are coming into care than are leaving. Almost 60 percent of kids we bring into care stay for more than two years. **Do you know how long two years is to a child?** As many as 30 percent of our kids experience homelessness compared to 7 percent of the general population. Only 50 percent receive a high school diploma by age 18 in contrast to 84 percent of their peers. Only somewhere between 2 and 10 percent get a BA compared to 33 percent of their peers. And **some think as many as 80 percent of the prison population touched our**

system at one time or another in their lives. This is a failing business model we must escape.

While many states track these statistics and care deeply about them, we aren't driven by them. We don't wake up worried about this. Instead we work more like an emergency room for the nation's most vulnerable families. By the time they get to us, we are most worried about getting to the sickest and the dying. And that fear drives us to removal. For some children, removal is definitely what they need. But sometimes we find ourselves taking kids first and figuring out their situation later. A system under stress finds it all too easy to fall back into this pattern. Far too often for child welfare, and for those of us in public trenches, the only public face we offer is either the removal of children or failure to keep them from dying and being seriously harmed.

Q: What can we do about these tragedies? How can we stop them from happening?

A: As systems, we see through this glass we have darkly. We overlook or miss these families because our tools, our policies, and our practices are designed to be very clear about what to do about abuse and safety, yet not so clear on what to do with slowly yet steadily escalating risk and neglect. As systems, we simply are not designed to have a line of sight on families at the margins: we are designed to have a laser-beam line

Today the child welfare business model is standing on a burning platform. Family First gives us a place to jump to . . . that is not about fear, fatality, and failure, but about strengthening and supporting families before they need a child welfare intervention.

- BJ WALKER, DIRECTOR,
ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

What does Family First mean for families and for child welfare systems?

of sight on children. And the tragedy of that approach is that children have a laser-beam line of sight on their parents, because they so desperately want our rescue to result in the healing and restoration of their families.

And that is the reason, I believe, that we have to line up, soldier-style, behind Family First, even with its less than perfect features. Not because of us, but because these kids need and want it so badly. They want restoration. They want their families healed.

Family First has to be front and center in the answer that comes to mind. We have to figure out how to open these opportunities for our partners at our human service and public health agencies to put their eyes and their touches on the families that need us to intervene on risk, and restore them to a level of health that allows them to raise their own children. It's an opportunity to realign and redeploy resources in ways that we haven't before.

Q: It sounds very complicated. How do you see that happening?

A: If we think of child welfare as a pyramid, the largest part of the pyramid is filled with kids in care in our systems. The touches we get to make now and then in prevention are in that narrow point at the top. But if we flipped the pyramid, families who need sustained but simple touches become the biggest part of who we deal with, and only a small number of children find themselves in the foster care system. This is about redefining risk and restoration, about seeing threats

while they're still in the risk arena, before they become safety issues, and about realigning our resources to make that change.

Our current paradigm invites us to give up on troubled families. But in this land of family values, **what if we took everything we've put in place so that strangers can take care of other people's children, and we offered it to vulnerable and challenged birth parents and their families?** This question needs to be asked and the time has come to ask it. What is getting in our way of doing that? What is blocking our view? What might we be missing? What assumptions are we making about these families that we need to reconsider?

Q: Is changing minds enough?

A: We need to change our minds first, and then we need to change the minds of the multitudes of potential critics who surround us and influence us. We need to change the minds of the folks who make the laws and write the news. When it comes to vulnerable and challenged families, to prevent removals we must be willing to see risk very differently than we do now. We have to realize that often our assumptions or expectations may not be tethered to their realities, and they need government to give them a break. We have to acknowledge that by the time we see these families, they are at their worst. And while it is hard for us to get past that, we must! And we have to own that we are hardwired to be more invested in our service plans, our assessments, and packaged programs than we are inclined to genuinely fall in love with the problems of these families.

With Family First we get a chance to clear our vision, stop rushing to the solutions we already have, and start building and using the solutions that these families really need.

- BJ WALKER, DIRECTOR,
ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

What does Family First mean for families and for child welfare systems?

And I know what you're thinking when that phone rings and you look down and you know that those people are calling you. They are family but they've got problems, and you say, "They're calling again!" But you answer the phone, because you're in love with your family! Our systems have to learn to love. We have to take a walk in their shoes and fall so deeply in love with their problems that we cannot let go until we do something meaningful for them and with them. If you've ever been in love you know how love will make you do. We have to do that for these families.

With Family First, we get a chance to clear our vision, stop rushing to the solutions we already have, and start building and using the new solutions these families really need. The challenge in front of us is to ask ourselves what that would look like in practice. What are some real opportunities that can change the game?

Q: What kinds of new opportunities are you talking about?

A: Let me talk about several. First, we need to stare the fatality and failure beast in the face, to conquer the obstacles that surround our business model, the thing we most fear as systems. We must remind ourselves that some 80 percent of child deaths in child welfare are children age birth to 3. That is a window we cannot afford to ignore. Perhaps it's time for us to think about whether every family should get a home visit when they have a baby? Is that something this nation is willing to consider? Because we know it can be highly effective in engagement. The most engaged parent you will find is the one who just had a baby, and yet it's a window that we don't fully explore.

We need to re-shape the values framing our work and embedded in our systems and in the minds and hearts of our workforce. We need to ask ourselves, what would we want for our own families? And I assure you the thing all of us don't want for our families is an encounter with the child welfare system.

We need to create universal family response systems that are collectively willing to own our mission of child

protection. Systems in which multiple programs and services across public health, human services, mental and behavioral health, programs that are already touching vulnerable families — often before they come to our attention — can help us get to families before we need to respond to abuse and neglect.

Q: How would those response systems reach the people who need them the most?

A: I can imagine lots of intentional activities happening at WIC offices, childcare facilities, early intervention programs, TANF offices, and food stamp offices, and even in schools and in after-school programs: in the places where people already show up! Into barbershops, beauty shops, churches, parks, and even nightclubs? We have to go where people who are vulnerable show up and stop waiting for them to show up in a child welfare hotline call and an investigation, when it's too late to do anything in the powerful way that children want and need us to intervene.

Q: Could you say more about how children and families need us to intervene to better support them?

A: We need to deploy what we already do well in effectively engaging and supporting families, but earlier. We need to take those strategies out of our foster care business model and use them with families before we even investigate them. There are lots of proven ways of doing child and family team meetings that can help us hear family voices and close the gap between our assumptions about them and who they are and what they really want.

Before families even get to the hotline, we need to promote prevention and support programs, programs like "Safe Families for Children" that introduce vulnerable families to volunteer host families, whose hospitality allows them to step in and care for children while their parents take a break or get things stabilized. These volunteers not only offer temporary care for children for no money, but they also mentor their parents and enrich these families' lives. They help

What does Family First mean for families and for child welfare systems?

parents find jobs, get apartments, move to other neighborhoods. This is a program that focuses on relationships, not transactions. It's sustainable, because with this program there's no harm in calling. As a matter of fact, in this model, you are successful if you do make a call for help — more than one time! If you've raised children, you know there have been times when you needed to call somebody. And programs like these offer families that kind of real, relationship-based safety net.

Q: Are you talking about family preservation?

A: Yes, but we need to significantly redesign and expand “family preservation,” “intact family,” “in-home family,” whatever term may be used. We need to redesign our “home of relative” practices: some of the homes of relatives are just a quarter-inch better off than the family we removed the child from, yet we take the child to their relative, drop them off, and don't engage.

We also need to expand the case management space we have so we can work more intensively with families before there is a crisis. We need a continuum of care that starts before the front door of the child welfare system. Those of us who have been around awhile know about primary prevention — everybody talks about it, loves it, but we can never quite figure out how to make it a real substantive approach in our field. And oftentimes it's because we think we just can't measure primary prevention. But in child welfare, we can measure primary prevention: we can measure the reduced number of children coming

into care, the decreasing number of calls to the hotline, the fewer deaths, more families together and supported and strong.

Q: What about family isolation?

A: I assure you that, despite living in a world of social media, many families are quite isolated, not connected to much more than what is around them. And what's around them are other struggling families, often existing in a harsh, nonforgiving, non-nurturing environment. It's a place that is not friendly to people who are challenged and unsure of their footing. **These are people who have grown used to not having real opportunities. And I want you to know they didn't miss the train; the train never came.**

These families are isolated, hiding in plain sight — in plain sight of their neighbors, school teachers, police, relatives, and even child welfare caseworkers. There's an enormous gap between us and our nation's most vulnerable families, who they are — **who they really are, not who we want them to be** — and what we know and don't know about them. The gap between who they are and our assumptions about them are hard-wired into our current child welfare business models.

Until we are willing to really know who these parents and families are, we cannot effectively show up in their lives, even if we come running in with a well-supported, evidence-based program. Not only do we need new

Until we are willing to really know who these parents and families are, we cannot effectively show up in their lives, even if we come running in with a well-supported, evidence-based program.

- BJ WALKER, DIRECTOR,
ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

What does Family First mean for families and for child welfare systems?

tools and skills, we need to change our minds about who they are, why they need our help, and what that help looks like.

Q: What is preventing us from changing our line of sight, from truly seeing families?

A: We need to be more focused on risk and restoration. As systems, we have been focused on safety, permanency, and well-being. But to affect permanency, we need to be willing to see risk differently, and we must be able to think about restoration — restoration for people. This is a people-oriented issue. **All families deserve this shot. Nobody is so bad that they shouldn't have the opportunity to be restored.**

Our safety lens and the foster care space we work in is so narrowly child-centered that it does not allow us to understand how families get to the point where they can't manage their most basic, fundamental role: protecting and raising their children. We need to move away from a child-first lens, which is a significant change for the field. Children come with adults, and they want the adults in their lives so badly, that the systems we run need to honor that. Otherwise, we don't actually honor the child. We have to challenge ourselves on that. We need to turn the system on its head and change the question we're asking: Who does the child most need? The answer is their parents.

P 800.228.3559

P 206.282.7300

F 206.282.3555

casey.org | KMResources@casey.org

