



Putting Families First Playbook

Local Child Welfare Agencies

Local administrators, directors and managers are critical to moving a transformation forward by articulating a vision for the change, providing support and serving as role models to effect change within their agencies. Child welfare professionals, including those responsible for child protective services (CPS) and youth justice (YJ), are vital in helping keep children with their families.

Connecting local agency staff to the overall vision of Putting Families First can help shape changes throughout the system.

Make it personal: Consider having a goal-setting conversation with the workforce. What is your overall agency goal that you are working towards in Putting Families First? How will you measure your progress?

Examples of local agency visions to work towards include:

- *The majority of our interventions will be focused on in-home.*
- *For children who are in out-of-home care, our agency will have more children placed with relatives than with strangers.*
- *We strive to place children within their community.*

What Can Local Child Welfare Agencies Expect Around Putting Families First?

Child welfare professionals will want to understand what is changing and how they are being asked to practice differently. To help aid local leaders, DCF in connection with Root Learning, identified the mindset and decision-making patterns related to successfully keeping children in home, as well as internal supports that are needed for the workforce. This research found a series of advanced workforce behaviors and supports in areas that have shown successful progress at keeping families together. This research can be found [here](#).

“Children and youth want to be with family. Separating children from their families has adverse effects and can contribute to negative and lifelong health and well-being outcomes. Putting Families First allows us to focus on the family and keep more children safely in their homes and safely reunify more children.”

***- Annette Beattie,
Child Welfare Division Manager
with Winnebago County
Human Services***





Key Talking Points

- Putting Families First challenges child welfare professionals to continually prioritize and reinforces the importance of keeping families in home, by asking “What will take to keep children with their families?” Asking this question creates a shift in perspective—it assumes keeping children with their families is possible and moves away from **if** it is possible.
 - ◇ Starting from the assumption that keeping children in home is possible allows for greater focus on eliminating barriers and aligning current resources to support children and their families.
- When individuals are being asked to do work differently, this can understandably create concern that this change may result in more work. For child welfare professionals who already are stretched thin, leaders can help staff understand their work in new and different ways. Agency leaders can consider additional ways to support the workforce by:
 - ◇ Shifting priorities and assignments to allow for the time needed for up-front work with families;
 - ◇ Protecting calendar times for days that child welfare professionals are expected to respond to same-days to allow additional space for time sensitive in-home planning needs;
 - ◇ Prioritizing, encouraging, supporting and modeling wellbeing and self-care for each employee;
 - ◇ and advocating for changes to policies that do not support well-being or cause negative impacts to a work/life balance.
- Be prepared that shifts in mindsets and practice come at different paces for each individual. When people shift to deeply understand the impacts of previously made decisions (for example, removing when it potentially wasn't necessary), there can be a sense of shame and personal responsibility.

- ◆ **Remember:** child welfare professionals have been doing what was previously asked of them—now the system is asking them to do things differently. Leaders can acknowledge, normalize and model this shift.



A critical piece of Putting Families First is building and engaging services to support families in their homes. Langlade County recently created a Community Case Manager position to follow through on this core commitment, and this Community Case Manager was there for one family when they needed it most.

Langlade County's Community Case Manager works with families to find and connect them with services after a referral is made (and there is no safety concern). This support is free, voluntary and structured to meet the unique needs of each family. Often, the goals center on financial literacy, education and child health and development.

A young first-time mother was connected with a Community Case Manager after her partner, the father of her child, unexpectedly passed away. Together, she and the Community Case Manager were able to identify some of her needs and goals: getting a job and driver's license, finding housing, enrolling her son in Early Head Start and connecting with a counseling service. Within months, she accomplished or was making progress on each of these goals.

Langlade County's newly-established Community Case Manager position was necessary to the success of this family. By navigating the sometimes-overwhelming landscape of concrete supports and community resources, the Community Case Manager was able to help the family get to where they are today—together and thriving in a loving family home. This is what is at the heart of Putting Families First.

How Can Local Child Welfare Agencies Support Putting Families First?

- **Review the Learning Map findings.** This research conducted through Root Learning, identified the mindset and decision-making patterns related to carrying out the work of keeping children in home, as well as the supports that are helpful for the workforce in carrying out this work. Critical questions for each mindset can help leaders reflect on areas to grow and support workforce expertise.

Make it personal: Review the advanced behaviors throughout the Learning Map Findings. Reflect on the Critical Questions for Leaders throughout the document to consider how best to shift local mindsets and decision-making practice.

- **Build opportunities for shared decision-making.** As child welfare professionals begin to practice differently, there can be an increased sense of risk associated with making the “right” or “wrong” decision. Leaders can address this by creating opportunities for shared decision-making.
 - ◊ This could mean ensuring multiple people are involved in decisions related to removals or facilitating staffing meetings with stakeholders. This helps ensure that child welfare professionals do not feel solely and individually responsible for case decision-making and outcomes.
- **Food for thought: Avoid using language that may give the perception of increased risk and can inadvertently create a culture of blame.**
 - ◊ *For example: “The family has had two failed safety plans” vs. “The team has learned more information about what supports the family needs and has adapted the plan as needed.”*
 - * *Use of the word “failure” attributes blame to families or the child welfare professional as opposed to acknowledging that all family situations change and learning what additional information/adaptations can help minimize risk to child safety.*
- **Move out of “crisis mode.”** The work within child welfare is often described as “emergency-based” and “crisis-driven.” It is extremely challenging to make complex decisions when in emergency or crisis mode. Therefore, leaders have an opportunity to help slow down decision-making however possible to give time for deep discussions.
 - ◊ Ask questions such as:
 - * What makes this an emergency? Why is this an emergency right now? Where is the child **now**? Who is with the child?
 - * How much time do we have to make a decision?
 - * Are there ways we can **slow** down to gather more information? Can we get more time to make a more informed decision?
 - * What would it take to get the family together?
 - * Where are the family’s supports (family, friends, like-kin, etc.) and how can they help?

Additional Resources

- [Family First 1-Page Overview](#) – a general overview of Family First.
- [Transforming Wisconsin’s Child Welfare System](#) – an overview of the research supporting the Putting Families First transformation.
- [TeamFirst \(Praed Foundation\)](#) – a field guide for safe, reliable and effective child welfare teams.
- **DCF’s Learning Maps** – The [first map](#) shows possibilities of the current structure of the child welfare system. The [second map](#) shows the future state of the child welfare system.

