



Data-driven management for agency operations: Improving service planning in Rhode Island’s child welfare agency

In early 2019, Rhode Island’s Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) began using a new data-driven performance improvement strategy to revamp service planning in order to improve reunification and adoption outcomes for children and families cared for by the department’s Family Services Unit.

The department had previously developed and deployed a set of data-driven management approaches with its contracted service providers, referred to as active contract management. Pairing high-frequency use of data and purposeful management had contributed to substantial improvements in prevention and placement outcomes for child welfare involved families. When the agency decided to address shortfalls in its reunification and adoption outcomes, it decided to explore whether it could create an internal-facing version of the tools it had applied with such success to performance improvement with external service providers.

This policy brief discusses the challenges DCYF sought to address, describes the approach it took to adapt active contract management, reports on the department’s initial results, and shares lessons for replicating this approach in other child protection agencies.

Too few foster children in Rhode Island have experienced successful exits from state care

In FY2017, just 40% of children removed from their families due to abuse or neglect successfully exited DCYF care to a permanent setting¹ within twelve months². As is common nationally, many families required to participate in ongoing child welfare services weren’t receiving additional attention when case progress towards permanency stalled. Children often remained in foster care longer than necessary due to delays in enrolling families in appropriate support services, changing permanency goals, or submitting paperwork to initiate adoptions often led to unnecessary extensions of a child’s time in foster care.

Fortunately, DCYF’s recent history offered a model for how to use data to diagnose, troubleshoot, and ultimately improve service delivery, as the agency had pioneered many of the active contract management strategies now being used by child protection agencies across the country

About active contract management

Active contract management (ACM) is a set of strategies developed by the GPL in partnership with government clients that apply high-frequency use of data and purposeful management of agency service provider interactions to improve outcomes from contracted services. ACM consists of high frequency, data-informed meetings between government agencies and social service providers designed to produce action that improves performance. ACM empowers leaders to detect and rapidly respond to problems, make consistent improvements to performance, and identify opportunities for reengineering service delivery systems. For more on ACM, visit govlab.hks.harvard.edu/active-contract-management.

¹ Successful permanency may include reunification with a child’s biological parents, adoption, or legal guardianship.

² RI DCYF, *Permanency Report: Entry Cohort of Children in Foster Care FY13 – FY17*, August 2017

to improve results from contracted service providers (see callout box). The opportunity for DCYF would be to take the lessons learned from this vendor-focused system and apply them to the work of frontline agency staff, with the ultimate goal of improving permanency outcomes.

Launching active divisional management

The department launched what it called “active divisional management” for its Family Services Unit in January 2019. DCYF Family Services Unit caseworkers are charged with shepherding families through the state child welfare system, with the goals of ensuring child safety, promoting family wellbeing, and returning children to permanent living situations as swiftly as these first two goals would allow.

Rhode Island’s typical approach for improving case practice within the Family Services Unit reflected a mix of strategies common to child protection systems around the country. The unit participated in federally mandated reviews and improvement plans, engaged in retrospective quality assurance reviews that produced in-depth analysis of practice in individual cases, and worked with national child welfare technical assistance organizations to evolve its practice model. Unit administrators had access to monthly dashboards that showed systemwide performance on a prioritized set of practice and outcome measures.

Despite these resources, improvements on permanency outcomes – as well the leading metrics the department believed were predictors of permanency – had lagged behind the department’s goals. The department wanted to complement these strategies with a new management approach that would enable the Family Services Unit to more deeply engage frontline staff and supervisors in prioritizing challenges, generating solutions, and implementing change.

DCYF developed “active divisional management” based upon what it had learned implementing active contract management with contracted service providers. Every two months, the Family Services Unit would collaborate with DCYF’s new Division of Performance Improvement to analyze permanency-related performance data, generate operationally relevant insights about barriers, and implement a set of solutions to address those challenges. Each performance improvement sprint would focus on a discrete performance improvement priority that, when layered together over time, would enable the department to substantially improve systemwide permanency outcomes.

Picking the first performance improvement sprint: Improving timeliness of case plans

After generating a series of hypotheses about the optimal area on which to start, DCYF selected to focus its first performance improvement sprint on improving the timeliness with which workers filed their case plans. There were two reasons for this choice:

First, the department had observed that the speed with which caseworkers finalized case plans for families often appeared to impact the family’s ability to subsequently achieve a positive system-exit. Case plans function as the agency’s “contract” with the family, defining what families need to achieve for their child protection case to close and providing a path to the services and supports that can help reach those goals.

Second, agency leaders believed that being able to demonstrate immediate improvements would cultivate buy-in with frontline caseworkers and supervisors necessary for broader system transformation. They knew frontline staff and supervisors already had multiple ideas for

potential practice changes. Timeliness to case plans was also a metric over which caseworkers had direct control – workers and supervisors often had the ability to improve service plan timeliness without significant action from other divisions within DCYF.

Generating and implementing three practice changes

At the first active divisional management strategy session in early 2019, the Family Services Unit leadership and staff looked at data pulled from DCYF’s case management system, which indicated that just 10% of cases with service plans due in the previous month had been filed on time. They also examined this data by regional units in order to discover whether some teams had discovered particularly promising strategies for filing plans on-time.

In a conversation facilitated by change management staff, the Family Services Unit team then generated hypotheses about barriers that could be driving this poor performance. They came up with a dozen potential practice changes that could be tried to address these barriers. Each possible change was assessed for how difficult it would be to implement and potential impact it had the potential to produce.

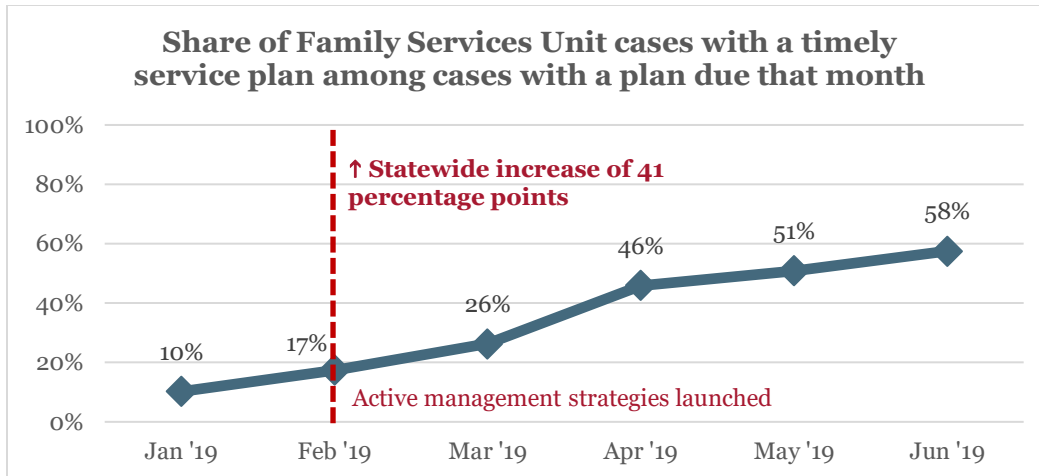
Based on these criteria, the department prioritized three changes to deploy and test in the following month:

Barrier	Prioritized change
1. Caseworkers receive reminders of service plan due dates too late to be actionable	Update case management system such that both workers and supervisors receive automated notification 30 days before any service plan on their caseload is due.
2. Supervisors have difficulty tracking service plans due dates and revision status	Enhance automated supervisor dashboard to classify cases by how soon service plans are due and adds tags for cases with plans currently under revision for easy reference.
3. Caseworkers can only record service plan updates when in the office	Equip workers with laptops so that they can begin entering information into a service plan while in the field with families, rather than taking notes on paper and entering these notes into the service plan when they return to their desks.

After deciding to pursue these changes, Family Services Unit supervisors worked with change management staff to implement them. Technology changes were mocked up with Excel-based dashboards; staff used these temporary tools to affirm the design and revise business processes before the IT team implemented them in the case management system.

Results and learning from the first performance improvement sprint

In the three months following the launch of these changes, service plan timeliness in Rhode Island has more than tripled: from 17% of case plans filed on time in February 2019 to 58% as of June 2019.



During this initial demonstration of active divisional management, Rhode Island has identified four lessons that it will be applying to future performance improvement sprints with the Family Services Unit and other divisions:

1. **Put the program staff in the driver's seat:** While data analysts and change management specialists offer important technical capabilities to support reforms, staff and leadership with hands-on service delivery experience are often best positioned to diagnose barriers, recognize opportunities for improvement, and shape the measures to pursue.
2. **Involve legal, IT, and other business support units in the change process:** RI's Family Services Unit quickly realized that several of the solutions for improving case plan timeliness would ultimately require changes by other units as well. Proactively inviting to active divisional management strategy meetings senior leaders from the department's legal office, management information services (IT), finance, and other business support units helped secure buy-in for the reforms initially prioritized by the field staff.
3. **Generating operationally relevant insights from data takes coaching and practice:** Most frontline staff have seen performance data before but few have been taught in how to use that data to improve their day-to-day work. DCYF allocated staff resources from the Division of Performance Improvement to actively coach program staff in how to pick the right data to review and how to generate operationally relevant insights from data.
4. **Allocate resources to drive implementation of reforms:** Organizing the steps to change a process or practice is often time consuming, presenting a challenge to program staff who have many ongoing day-to-day responsibilities. RI DCYF learned that it was necessary to designate a project manager from the Division of Performance Improvement to coordinate implementation plans, track follow-through on tasks, and flag issues to be elevated to senior leadership.

Rhode Island also determined its active divisional management process is best supported by a high-frequency meeting cadence that pairs bimonthly director-led strategy meetings – during which challenges are diagnosed, targeted interventions are identified, and reforms assessed and

spread – with weekly staff-level implementation meetings to drive and monitor progress on these interventions.

Since demonstrating the promise of this approach with service plan timeliness, DCYF is using it to generate improvements in reducing delays in the scheduling of permanency-related court hearings and improving the quality of case plans such that families are more consistently matched to the services that can best meet their needs.

Implications for other public child protection agencies

While still early, Rhode Island’s experience suggests that other public child protection agencies may be able to make progress on knotty problems by applying a set of tools inspired by active divisional management. The core principles underlying of this approach are straightforward but often distinct from how agencies typically operate:

- *Data-driven*: Using administrative and manually-collected data to diagnose challenges, uncover opportunities for systems re-engineering, and track progress so improvements can be adjusted over time and agencies can identify which reforms to make permanent.
- *Collaborative*: Performance improvement activities are approached as a reflection of a mutual responsibility for improving outcomes that is shared by agency leadership, frontline staff, and business support functions rather than as a mechanism for compliance monitoring or punitive responses, as is often the case with traditional performance management techniques.
- *Action-oriented*: Executive meeting time should be used to identify, prioritize, and plan solutions to test rather than simply observe historical trends.

Agencies looking to replicate this approach can experiment might experiment with 3 performance improvement sprints with a single unit to learn how a strategy like active divisional management can be best deployed in their own context.

For more on reforms at Rhode Island DCYF, visit GPL’s project page at: <https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/rhode-island-department-children-youth-and-families-performance-improvement>. For more on active contract management and related performance improvement strategies developed by the GPL, visit: <https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/tools>.

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