



Learning Session: Incubating Local Innovation to Spark System-Wide Change

This Learning Series Recap summarizes insights from a conversation with JooYeun Chang, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary (PDAS) at the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Part of the Government Performance Lab's (GPL) [10th Anniversary Learning Series](#), this conversation explored how to design local innovations that can build towards system-wide change. The excerpts highlighted below have been edited for clarity and brevity. Listen to the full conversation [here](#).

Setting out a transformative vision in Michigan

Prior to joining the Biden-Harris administration, PDAS Chang led the child welfare agency for the State of Michigan. As part of her opening remarks, she described that her vision at that time was to create a child welfare system that addressed the many systemic factors that surround children and families. Realizing that it's impossible for the child welfare system to succeed in complete isolation, PDAS Chang explained that her goal was to develop a more expansive approach that accounts for the impact that racism, poverty, and other larger societal issues have on child welfare – and then develop a set of preventative strategies that could demonstrate how a more dynamic system could achieve results. PDAS Chang explained that, like many agency leaders across the country, the mission in Michigan was to move away from a punitive, remedial child welfare system to one that provides preventative, holistic care for families.

"In Michigan, I wanted to demonstrate that it was possible to transform a child welfare system by moving it further up-stream, so that we are not constantly focusing on the tail-end of problems and blaming children, their parents, and ultimately their communities for larger systemic failures."

To this end, she described that one of the first things she did was conduct a system-wide assessment to analyze every point of contact with families and identify areas of improvement. Through this assessment, it became clear to the agency that unmet mental health needs were a huge challenge facing child welfare-involved families. According to PDAS Chang, addressing these unmet mental health needs was key to both improving a child's experience within the foster care system and preventing instances of foster care placements in the first place.

"In order to transform Michigan's system from so heavily relying on foster care to one of true community-based and early intervention, we knew addressing mental health needs would have to be part of the equation. And, if we could start to make improvements here, it would pave the way for more upstream reforms."

Moving beyond 'pilot mode'

Many government leaders are trying to figure out how to help their agencies invest in prevention and build responses that are centered on children and families. However, in trying to translate this vision into action, it is easy to get stuck in 'pilot mode' without a runway to bring changes to scale.

PDAS Chang described how Michigan's child mental health initiative provides an example of moving from pilot phase to state-wide implementation. Knowing that poor mental health can lead to potential child welfare system involvement, PDAS Chang's team in Michigan wanted to launch a pilot that brought the behavioral health and child welfare systems together in a way that was sustainable. And, to demonstrate that the agency could safely prevent children from entering the welfare system by meeting their mental health needs, PDAS Chang described a need to first show competence in meeting the mental health needs of the kids *already* in their care. She felt that it was important to launch a pilot that was small, actionable, and had a clear goal: connecting child welfare-involved children with the mental health services they needed.

"Many kids, who start in a family-based setting, bounce around in the foster care system because of unmet mental health needs. And when they age out they sometimes end up in other systems, such as the criminal justice system. We wanted to stop that continuum, and – rather than waiting for a crisis – set out to identify mental health needs at the first signal."

PDAS Chang explained that by using data to identify gaps in the current system, the child welfare and behavioral health teams could come together to improve the experience for kids in the foster care system. Once 50 percent of child welfare-involved children were connected with mental health support, for example, the team could point concretely to this success and use it as momentum to expand beyond 'pilot mode.'

According to PDAS Chang, a critical component of Michigan's success was demonstrating competency in the child welfare agency's core responsibilities. When she first arrived, Michigan had over 1,300 cases that were overdue on investigations of abuse or neglect. This investigation backlog, if left unchecked, could have stopped progress on the team's vision for transforming the child welfare agency. She told participants that her team's ability to improve child safety by eliminating this backlog helped pave the way for more transformational reforms.

"Actually achieving [backlog elimination] helped change the minds of career staff, that had been in the job twenty years, to really understand that transformation was possible. And it secured us the runway to do more risky things that were of benefit to children and families because we could attest to the fact that we were competent in our core responsibilities... This evidence of effectiveness was crucial. If you don't have credibility in the work, you can't do bold, transformational things."

Opportunities at a national scale

PDAS Chang explained that her current role with the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) offers many opportunities to take lessons from the state and local level and apply them at a national scale. Chief among them includes the opportunity to center the experience of the whole family in the design and implementation of their programming. She acknowledged that for families who are focused on meeting their basic needs, the number and different types of existing programs can be overwhelming and near impossible to navigate. Rather than focusing on these individual programs, PDAS Chang articulated a desire for ACF to support the family unit more holistically and better connect them with preventative, comprehensive services.

*“When our systems don’t know how to adequately serve the most vulnerable, individuals end up on the front door of our foster care system. We have to do better. We have to be a child **well-being** system. Whether we are TANF, housing assistance, or early childhood intervention, we all have a role to play to connect families with services they need. This is the promise and the hope of ACF, that we can treat every family with dignity and respect and recognize their holistic needs. Whether it’s making eligibility more streamlined or making services more accessible, we want to work together to be one system that helps the entire family in the context of their community.”*

According to PDAS Chang, shifting towards a prevention-focused approach signals an unprecedented opportunity to transform the child welfare system to better serve families across the country. For example, she highlighted that funding from proposed legislation could pave the way for preventative programs that can reduce child poverty, improve maternal and child health, and create more equitable access to early education. The Biden-Harris administration recognizes, however, that continued work is needed to ensure that these reforms reach and support all segments of the population.

“We have the opportunity to transform child poverty in perhaps the most dramatic way in my lifetime. We could guarantee affordable childcare for every single child in this country, we could ensure that pre-kindergarten is universal and free. We are on the precipice of actually being able to realize that promise of social justice, and the challenge will be how do we honor that promise through the policies and legislative decisions we apply at the state and local level. Passing a law is almost the easy part. As hard as it is to pass laws, it is so much more difficult to actually implement them into effective programs.”

Elevating the experiences of children and families

PDAS Chang told participants that reforming the child welfare system requires integrating client voice into the decision making process and talking to people who have experience with the system to understand what does and does not work. She explained that in Michigan, her agency relied on a group of relative caregivers to serve an advisory role, and regularly spoke with young leaders who had gone through the foster care system about their experiences. According to PDAS Chang, going out into communities, speaking with staff, caregivers, and groups of young people helped lay the groundwork for transformational change in Michigan’s child welfare agency.

“As leaders, we might think we know what the problem is and what the potential solutions are, but we need to talk to people with experience to understand that we may be completely wrong. If you don’t know the right problem, even if you have the best solution and a great execution plan, it’s not going to have the impact that you want.”

“There is nothing more powerful, nothing that will teach you more about the work that needs to be done, than actually going into the field with your staff members and meeting the families and children and community members that you serve...”

“In Michigan, I went on a ride along to visit a young mom who was rapidly going through baby formula. A community provider thought maybe she didn’t know what she was doing, and because we don’t have a child-wellbeing system in place, they called this in to child protective services. Before we went in, the case worker told me that this young mom had previously aged out of foster care. When we got upstairs and told her who we were, she instantly burst into tears, because her only experience with the child protection system was when she was taken from her mom. We assured her that we wanted to help, and it was clear that she really loved her kids. She didn’t have employment, she had no form of transportation, and she had just received Section 8 housing but the landlord didn’t have running water or a working refrigerator. Our case worker was able to help her with these challenges. All along this young mom was eligible for so many services, but she didn’t know how to navigate the system.”

Laying the groundwork for transformational change

In closing, PDAS Chang shared a few pieces of advice for state and local leaders who are trying to lay the groundwork for transformational change. The first piece of advice is to take the time to do a full system scan. She explained that in order to gain the public trust necessary to do transformational change it is crucial to demonstrate competence in the agency’s core responsibilities. Her second piece of advice is to build strategic partnerships. She described how difficult it is to do this type of work alone (especially when considering the many competing demands facing a new leader), so partnerships are crucial. According to PDAS Chang, partners can play a key role in pinpointing system gaps and identifying weak spots that can help leaders understand where to begin in their plans for reform. In addition, building this stakeholder network early can provide a foundation for sustainable changes that persist after a leader moves on.

PDAS Chang’s third piece of advice is to let values drive the work. She described having to make really difficult choices throughout her career, many of which were not clear cut. She explained that having clarity around the values that guided her work allowed her to keep on track. Being driven by values, she argued, also makes it easier to understand how much information is necessary to make quick and decisive action that can lead to progress.

The Government Performance Lab is grateful for support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, Casey Family Programs, the Corporation for National and Community Service Social Innovation Fund, the Dunham Fund, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the Pritzker Children’s Initiative, and the Rockefeller Foundation.
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