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Using Strengths-Based Leadership to Improve the Child Welfare System

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On a sunny morning in 2003, eight-year-old Anna of El Cajon, CA was excited. She was going to appear in her first school play that night. Life hadn't been easy for this little girl, and it was about time she caught a break. More times than Anna could remember, she watched her dad beat up her mother. The last time police took him to jail.

The play went on that night, but unfortunately Anna wasn't there. Her father got out of jail; her mom let him back into the house and he beat her in front of Anna. East Region social workers from the County's Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) Child Welfare Services (CWS) had no choice but to remove Anna from this dangerous environment. A caseworker drove her the 16 miles to the County's emergency shelter.

Anna understood why she had to leave home. What she didn't understand was why there was nobody to drive her to the play. As the curtain went up, Anna sat heartbroken in a cottage at the emergency shelter with kids and staff she did not know. It wasn't just that she felt bad for herself; she felt terrible about letting her classmates down. Anna knew all too well what it felt like to be let down.

Unfortunately, Anna was not alone and her story is similar to many other foster children across the country (Aarons, Monn, Raghavan, Wells, & Leslie., 2010). East Region came to understand that to a child, her neighborhood is the world. We knew instinctively that—despite organizational or programmatic barriers—the best way to help children was to make the neighborhood their world too. To make that happen, East Region made big changes in the way it fulfilled its mission to protect children at risk.

In 2000, HHS leadership in the County's East Region applied transformational management practices to build a strengths-based workplace, engage employees and drive performance based on research from the Gallup organization. After Anna's experience and so many others like it, East Region decided to embark on a process to change child welfare services so that even if a child had to be removed from their home, they wouldn't have to leave their neighborhood. Deputy Director Pam Smith set the outcome – to improve the relationship between schools and child welfare in East Region so that we can make efforts to place children in familiar environments. Utilizing strengths-based leadership practices was the foundation for the transformation of child welfare service delivery. Based on research from the Gallup organization, great managers set the right outcome then allow each person to use their own strengths and talents to find a way to get there (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). The goal was to strengthen the leadership in East Region and

increase staff engagement, which would in turn lead to improved performance as a child welfare system.

Method

East Region CWS began with “the school project” in which social workers were assigned to some of the local high schools and were told to simply to start being at the schools and building relationships. They handed out their business cards, gave out their cell phone numbers, and started participating in multi-disciplinary team meetings. The workers started to gain the trust of the school staff; the staff knew them, they felt like child welfare services finally listened to them and responded when the school had concerns. Quickly all of the schools in East County San Diego started to want a social worker assigned to their school. As we had more schools than workers, we knew this would not be possible.

HHS East Region began to partner with stakeholders in the community to align CWS delivery with school boundaries. CWS staff, schools, community collaboratives, the East Region’s Multi-System Workgroup, and law enforcement began formulating ideas of how to restructure the delivery of child welfare services to improve outcomes for children and families with a focus on placing children in familiar environments. Research suggests that children who are placed with relatives, rather than licensed foster homes, have better well-being outcomes (Winokur, Holtan, & Valentine, 2009). Additionally, children who are able to maintain enrollment in their same school have better educational outcomes (Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008). In 2003, East Region began utilizing “WayStation” foster homes – short-term foster homes located in each community that were available 24 hours a day, seven days per week to take children. Rather than having to take children the 16 miles to the local emergency shelter, they could go directly to a home in their community where they could attend their same school. It also allowed time to assess relatives in order to make the next best placement. WayStation homes soon became very successful and the community and CWS began to consider other practices to keep children in familiar environments.

After almost two years of gathering data, planning, and working with a marketing consultant, in 2004 East Region CWS launched a restructuring of child welfare service delivery in which social workers are based in geographic clusters according to school boundaries. East Region CWS called its program Neighborhoods for Kids with the goal of changing the community’s perception of the child welfare system. The fusion of Neighborhoods for Kids with the employee engagement initiative

and building a strengths-based workplace created an energized workplace that drives performance and ensures success.

Neighborhoods for Kids reorganized and restructured child welfare service delivery with the vision that all East County children will be surrounded by familiar people and places that encourage them to thrive. Neighborhoods for Kids expands the traditional CWS focus from primarily just child safety to include a larger focus on child well-being, especially related to academic success and maintaining cultural connections, as the basis for selecting out-of-home placements. The first priority became keeping children in a familiar environment – either with a family member, friend, or in a foster home where they could attend their school of origin. School continuity is critically important for these children's life outcomes, as demonstrated by a national study showing foster youth who had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school (Pecora et al., 2003; Casey Family Programs, 2011). This contrasts with previous practices of sending children to the emergency shelter or placing them in foster homes regardless of how far away (geographically or culturally) those homes were from their neighborhoods. Additionally by maintaining children in a familiar environment they are more likely to stay connected to their family, their culture, extracurricular activities, and religious practices.

In addition to the focus on placing children in familiar environments, social workers now also worked in clusters with all programs under the same supervisor. Typically child welfare services are broken down into units based on program type – investigations, court work, family reunification, family maintenance, and permanency. Under the cluster-based system, investigations social workers, court workers, and ongoing case carrying workers were in one cluster together under the same supervisor. This dramatically improved communication between caseworkers and the continuity of decision-making on a case because the supervisor was already familiar with the family.

We also improved our relationships with law enforcement by establishing a point of contact. This communication allowed the law enforcement to collaborate with a social worker in order to help them respond to a situation that involved a child. Law enforcement could use the WayStation homes, eliminating the need to drive all the way to the emergency shelter. Our law enforcement liaison assists any time law enforcement is removing a child so that we can try to find a relative to care for the child immediately.

Behind the operations of Neighborhoods for Kids was the leadership that gave workers the confidence and ability to make the

decisions they needed in order to meet the outcome of placing children in familiar environments (DeRue & Workman, 2011). Neighborhoods for Kids was created by and with staff who were part of the two years of focus groups to develop the policies and procedures. When staff had ideas, like WayStation, or the law enforcement liaison, or an educational liaison, those ideas were listened to and implemented.

The East Region executive team based its leadership principles on research from the Gallup organization. The leadership team in East Region includes the Deputy Director, Assistant Deputy Director, managers, supervisors, and senior social workers. The entire leadership team has been meeting every quarter since 2000 to discuss different leadership topics and continue to focus on implementing strength-based principles.

The leadership team has used a variety of tools and focuses on strengthening the twelve core elements of organizations that have very engaged employees (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). The team uses the StrengthsFinder® to identify the top five strength themes of each staff person and assign work based on people's strength themes (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). There is a large emphasis on using storytelling to spread the values, expectations and hoped-for outcomes. We share stories about finding relatives to place children with or keeping a child in a home where they can attend their school or become part of a religious, cultural, or familial connection. It gives an opportunity to recognize the great work that staff have done as well as further spread the mission of Neighborhoods for Kids.

Results and Discussion

Another part of strengths-based leadership includes holding staff accountable to meeting expectations and outcomes. We use data to drive discussions. If we are not meeting our outcomes, we work as a team to identify the challenges and barriers. In addition, we attempt to discover the things that are working well and we need to facilitate more. Since we track data every month and drill down to the worker level, we also quickly address any problems we see with individual workers. The goal is to find out what the worker is doing well and how we might be able to use their strengths to work around the challenges they might be facing.

By combining both the restructuring of child welfare services and implementing strengths-based leadership, Neighborhoods for Kids has dramatically improved outcomes for children and families. East Region has the second largest child welfare workload in San Diego County. On average, 325 child abuse referrals are investigated each month with about

28 children taken into protective custody. Additionally, about 300 children are in family reunification cases and 400 in family maintenance cases at any given time.

Neighborhoods for Kids was implemented and continues to run operations using only the existing child welfare allocation; no additional money was obtained to implement or sustain this model. After eight years of full operation of Neighborhoods for Kids, the restructuring of the child welfare system along with the implementation of strengths-based management has truly improved outcomes for children and families. East Region Child Welfare Services meets or exceeds most of the Federal and State targets for outcomes set for child welfare. (See Table 1.).

Table 1.

	East Region (FY 10-11)	Federal/State Target
Timely Reunification (w/in 12 months) (Exit Cohort)	76.2%	75.2%
Re-entry following reunification	9.4%	9.9%
Placement with Relatives/NREFMs (not including children in legal guardianship)	68.9%	65%
Attending school of origin	61.6%	Not Set
High School Completion	87.8%	Unknown
Placement Stability (1 st year in care)	89.7%	82%

Neighborhoods for Kids focuses on key outcomes related to keeping children connected to their neighborhood as well as those important for child safety, well-being, and permanency. Neighborhoods for Kids meets or exceeds Federal and/or State standards for many child welfare outcome measures. Because every number is a child, this makes a huge difference to the children in East County San Diego. More of them remain in their school of origin, increasing their chances of success in school and graduating from high school. Children are likely to be placed with a relative or family friend, even if they have to be removed from their parents. If children are removed from their home, every effort is made to safely reunify them with their parents within one year. Staying in the same

neighborhood and with relatives helps facilitate reunification by making it easier for the parents to visit.

Because staff have their hearts and minds tied to the vision of Neighborhoods for Kids, they are willing to do “whatever it takes” to help improve child safety, well-being, and permanency. Additionally, there were benefits to staff from using a strengths-based leadership model. Within the first year of restructuring, the staff saved over \$30,000 in mileage payments.. This meant staff was having less wear and tear on their car, spent less on gas, and had more efficient ways to visit the children on their caseload. East Region also saw an increase in staff satisfaction. They administered staff satisfaction surveys and in 2012 Neighborhoods for Kids had the second highest employee satisfaction in the County of San Diego.

Neighborhoods for Kids has been part of a National Breakthrough Series Collaborative on creating a more trauma-informed child welfare system for the last two years. One of the essential elements of a trauma-informed system is managing professional and personal stress (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008) As we have focused on employee well-being based on the book *Well-Being, the Five Essential Elements*, also from the Gallup organization (Rath & Harter, 2010) we help address secondary traumatic stress.

Throughout the implementation of Neighborhoods for Kids, there has been a significant number of changes throughout the child welfare system. More efforts have been focused on family engagement, incorporating family group decision making models, and increasing efforts to safely achieve permanency for children. All of these efforts likely contributed to some of the improved outcomes. However, Neighborhoods for Kids has exceeded the expectations in many areas and made even more significant strides than other child welfare jurisdictions. The difference may well be the focus on strengths-based leadership and staff engagement.

Relationships are at the heart of what Neighborhoods for Kids is all about. Our children and families keep relationships that are important to them by remaining in familiar environments. Our social workers have built and continue to maintain strong relationships with schools, law enforcement, and other community partners to help us achieve our vision. Supervisors and managers are expected to build and maintain strong relationships with their staff using a strengths-based leadership approach. After eight years we are getting closer to achieving our vision that “All East County children are surrounded by familiar people and places that encourage them to thrive.”

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