

Accessibility and Clarity of State Child Welfare Agency Mission Statements

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The authors reviewed 40 mission statements guiding U.S. public child welfare practice for accessibility, clarity, and values. Nine of the 40 state-administered child welfare agencies had not posted their missions on the Web as of October 2002, and 30 mission statements required a 12th-grade or college reading level for easy comprehension. The mission statements most often expressed the goals, values, and processes of safety, permanence, well-being, family preservation, cultural competence, self-sufficiency, and partnership. Mission statements can be an important tool for improving child welfare outcomes by providing direction; therefore, agency administrators should consider how clear and accessible their state agency mission statements are.

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The lack of shared vision and values is the seed bed of almost all other problems. (Covey, 1991, p. 166) The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA, 1996) recommended that agencies use mission statements as a tool to identify and focus the agency, define its purpose, identify target populations, and address culturally and ethnically diverse client populations and the geographic area served. The mission statement should "provide the organization with a compass for making decisions in a rapidly changing world by providing a shared sense of long-range direction" (CWLA, 1996, p. 19).

Gustafson and Allen (1994) called for child welfare agencies to adopt a new management model grounded in well-crafted mission statements. Currently, no national standard or consistency exists with regard to the structure, content, or use of mission statements in public child welfare agencies (Gustafson & Allen, 1994).

Literature Review

The field has two schools of thought regarding mission statements—one comes out of the pragmatic world of business and one is a product of the abstract world of philosophy and ethics. From a business perspective, defining a readable mission statement is the first step in strategic management. As such, it addresses two critical questions: "What is our business, and what should it be?" (Campbell & Nash, 1992, p. 12). The philosophy and ethics school views mission statements as the "cultural glue" that brings an organization together. The "glue" is composed of values and norms that influence behavior, cooperation, and how the organization is to pursue goals (Campbell & Nash, 1992).

Campbell and Nash (1992) maintained that both schools of thought make important contributions to our understanding of mission statements. They pointed out that the "mission is an issue that involves both the hearts (culture) and minds (strategy) of employees" (p. 14). In an effort to embrace these two important dimensions, they proposed that all mission statements discuss values that are conceptualized as the organization's beliefs and principles.

Reisman (1986) suggested that when employees perceive the mission statement as "noble or transcendent," it can result in more commitment and an "inspired" performance (p. 393). If they have a positive attachment and a sense of shared values, employees tend to be more committed and satisfied and are less likely to leave (Vardi, Wiener, & Popper, 1989). In a study that specifically examined public child welfare workers, Rycraft (1994) found that having a sense of mission is an important factor in employee loyalty, commitment, and retention.

The way mission statements are formulated can affect the daily functioning of public agencies and institutions. In a study of mission statements in 304 public schools, Weiss and Piderit (1999) found that missions vary and that "the choices that managers make in the content and rhetorical style of their mission statements can have consequences that facilitate or impair subsequent performance" (p. 193). Using content analysis to identify themes, they found that mission statements may affect performance in a negative as well as positive manner.

Not everyone supports the use of mission statements as an effective management tool (Klemm, Sanderson, & Luffman, 1991), but proponents believe that mission statements that are clear, well defined, value driven, and relatively short will improve the performance of an organization (Bart & Baetz, 1998; CWLA, 1996; Cochran & David, 1986; Posner, Kouzes, & Schmidt, 1985; Vardi et al., 1989; Weiss & Piderit, 1999). Little empirical research, however, actually demonstrates how mission statements affect organizations (Bart & Baetz, 1998; Cochran & David, 1986; Pearce & David, 1987; Weiss & Piderit, 1999). Mission statements can only guide the efforts of an organization. If the values are not enforced, this may cause a cynical view that the mission statement is purely "window dressing" (Weiss, 1996).

Mission statements may be an important tool for improving child welfare outcomes. Gustafson and Allen (1994) suggested that the child welfare agency management system has been a neglected area with no concerted effort to improve. The result is a system without adequate direction, resulting in burnout among

caseworkers and failures in meeting the needs of families and children. This study explored state-administered public child welfare mission statements and serves as an initial effort to understand the guiding mandates of public child welfare agencies.

Method

The researchers conducted an initial web search of state-administered public child welfare agency mission statements throughout 2001. They conducted a second review in October 2002. They ultimately included 40 mission statements representing 100% of the state-administered public child welfare agencies, as identified by CWLA (1998), in the analysis. They also included the District of Columbia, as well as Nevada, which is a partially state-administered system, for a total of 40 of 51 included systems. The remaining 11 states are county-administered systems (California, Colorado, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin) (CWLA, 1998).

Accessibility

In the initial web search, 21 states had mission statements that were accessible on the Internet. The researchers contacted the remaining 19 states by e-mail to locate the mission statements. Ten states responded to the e-mails with directions to the location of the mission statement on their website or with copies of their mission statement. The researchers sent letters to the nine agencies that did not respond to e-mail requests and contacted them by phone. In the second review, eight mission statements remained unavailable on the web, and one was removed.

Clarity

The researchers initially analyzed the mission statements for clarity using the SMOG readability index. The SMOG index is one of several readability scales, but it is the only one modified to mea-

sure the contents of web pages and documents shorter than 30 sentences. No readability scales accurately measure reading levels with samples of less than 10 sentences, however, so the findings must be viewed with caution. Reading a level calculated using the modified formula of the SMOG index begins with the passage to be reviewed, then:

1. divides the number of polysyllabic words (except for words ending in *ly*, *ed*, *ing*, or *ies*, unless they are polysyllabic prior to the ending, such as in *policy*) by the number of sentences,
2. subtracts the number of sentences from 30,
3. multiplies the answers to Steps 1 and 2,
4. adds the number of polysyllabic words,
5. rounds to the closest square root, and
6. adds 3.

The result is a readability measure reported as an educational grade level. The findings from the SMOG index include a standard error of 1.5 grades. According to McLaughlin (1969), "This formula will predict the grade of a passage correctly within one and a half grades in 68% of the cases" (p. 643; for the SMOG counting rules and conversion table, see <http://www.med.utah.edu/pated/authors/readability.html>).

The mission statement of the Alabama Family Services Division illustrates the readability results as scored on the SMOG index. With the polysyllabic words highlighted, the mission statement is:

The mission of the Family Services Division is to **develop** and **administer** programs, **policies** and standards that are directed at preventing or **ameliorating** abuse, neglect, **dependency**, and **exploitation** of children and elderly and **disabled** adults. The mission further seeks to develop and maintain a **quality** system of care for children and their **families** and for adults through the **provision** of services aimed at achieving safety, **permanency**, and improved well-being in their own homes as well as out-of-home settings. (<http://www.dhr.state.al.us/fsd/default.asp>)

This mission statement consists of two sentences containing 81 words with 11 polysyllabic words. The reading level on the SMOG index is measured at a college reading level of 16.4.

Content

The researchers conducted a content analysis of the mission statements to determine which goals, values, and processes guide child welfare practice. They extracted the goals, values, and processes through both deductive and inductive reviews. Once they had identified these items, they assigned definitions, and two researchers conducted independent reviews to determine the frequency with which state mission statements documented each goal, value, and process.

The first review was a deductive review for the federally mandated goals of permanency, safety, and well-being. Safety is defined in the federal Child and Family Services Review (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2000) procedures manual as follows: "Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect. Children are safely maintained in their own homes whenever possible" (p. 3). Based on this definition, the researchers determined that the mission statement contained the value of safety if it included some form of the words *safety* or *protection* or the phrase "maintained in their own home."

The DHHS (2000) CFSR manual defines permanency as: "Children have permanency and stability in their living situation. The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children" (p. 3). Based on this definition, the researchers determined that the mission statement contained the value of permanency if it included some form of the words *permanency*, *continuity*, or *stability*.

The researchers determined that missions contained the value of well-being if they included the words *well-being* or *enhanced capacity* or if they made reference to service referrals. The federal definition of child and family well-being reads: "Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs. Children receive appro-

priate services to meet their educational...physical and mental health needs" (DHHS, 2000, p. 3). During the identification of the three federally identified values of safety, permanency, and well-being, the authors became aware of many other values contained in the mission statements and decided to analyze the content of other values.

The deductive analysis was followed by an inductive review to isolate the additional goals, values, and processes expressed in state missions. Cultural competence, self-sufficiency, partnership, leadership, prevention, family preservation, service provision, juvenile corrections or youth accountability, and advocacy emerged.

The researchers developed a checklist containing each state's mission statement and all 12 of the goals, values, and processes. Two reviewers independently reviewed each state's mission and checked off the values included in the statement. Interrater reliability for this analysis was scored at 96.6% agreement.

Findings

Accessibility

Forty state-administered public child welfare agencies are responsible for the protection of children in the United States. When the initial review took place in 2001, 21 of these agencies had mission statements that were accessible online. As of January 2001, 11 states had not posted their mission statements on the web. These included Arizona, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Hampshire, South Dakota, and Utah. Since that time, Florida, Mississippi, and Utah have added their mission statements to their state websites.

Not all mission statements on the web are prominently displayed. Three child welfare agencies, Idaho, Florida, and Missouri, share a mission statement with the larger umbrella human resources/human services organization. In other cases, the mission statement is accessible but buried. For example, Vermont emailed the authors directions to their social services policy manual to find their mission statement.

In October 2002, the researchers conducted the second review of mission statements for the 40 states, and the following changes were of interest: Six states had changed their mission statements, four states had removed the mission statement from their website, three had added the mission statement to their website, nine states had different web addresses for the mission statement, and nine states did not have the mission statement on their websites. These results are of interest as one would assume that accessibility is important to the image and presentation of the individual agencies. Mission statements are of little use if they are not known.

Clarity

Clarity is defined as the readability of the mission statement. Nearly half the total U.S. adult population is estimated to perform in the lower two levels on a five-point scale of prose literacy proficiency (Kaestle, Campbell, Finn, Johnson, & Mikulecky, 2001). Prose literacy is defined as the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts that include editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993).

Public child welfare agencies traditionally serve clients in the lower levels of prose literacy, including children, underprivileged families, unemployed people, and less-educated parents. Unemployed individuals typically rank high among the lowest level of literacy proficiency (Kirsch et al., 1993). Past studies indicate that as many as 45% of the children entering the child welfare system come from homes supported by public assistance (Mandel, 1996). Prose literacy at the lower two levels suggest reading levels at less than a high school education (S. Stein, personal communication, July 7, 2002).

In 30 of the 40 states reviewed, residents must have a reading level at the 12th grade or greater to easily comprehend the mission statement of their state public child welfare agency. Nine of the remaining states' mission statements scored in a high school educational range. Montana was the only state that had a mission statement that did not require more than a 9th-grade education

(8.5) as measured on the SMOG index. Mission statements ranged from 7 to 147 words in length. Montana had the shortest mission statement: "To keep children safe and families strong" (<http://www.dphhs.state.mt.us/divisions/cfs/cfs.htm>). Tennessee and Mississippi host the most difficult mission statements as rated using the SMOG index. The Tennessee mission statement is scored at a postgraduate college level. The mission statement reads:

The Tennessee Department of Children's Services, in collaboration with juvenile courts, local communities, schools, families and other state agencies, will provide timely, appropriate and cost effective services for children in state custody and at risk of custody so these children can strive to reach their full potential as productive, competent and healthy adults. (<http://www.state.tn.us/youth/dcsinfo/index.htm>)

South Dakota proved to be the most difficult to understand based on a reference to legislation in the mission: "The Mission of Child Protection Services is to investigate child abuse and neglect referrals and to provide and regulate services to children who have been determined to be in need of protection according to S.D.C.L. 26-8A-2" (Alisa DeMers, personal communication, January 9, 2001).

Content

Only 10 agencies (Alabama, Arizona, the District of Columbia, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Utah) specifically included all three federal outcome goals of safety, permanency, and well-being in their missions. Eighty-five percent of the mission statements address safety, 37% address permanency, and 50% address well-being. Oklahoma had all three goals in its mission statement at the beginning of this project, but recently revised the mission and excluded permanency and well-being.

As the raters were reviewing the mission statements, it became clear that states identify many values other than those mandated by

the federal government for child protection or public child welfare agencies. Other goals, values, and processes are the provision of leadership, cultural competence, family preservation, self-sufficiency, partnership, prevention, the provision of services, and advocacy.

Twelve states include the value of self-sufficiency in their mission statement. *Self-sufficiency* is defined as enabling families to live and care for themselves in a productive or independent fashion. Seven of the 12 states that include self-sufficiency (Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, Wyoming) appear to be umbrella agencies that are also responsible for public assistance. The other five states, however, appear to have mission statements specifically for child welfare.

The researchers developed family preservation as a separate category in the content analysis. It was defined as maintaining and strengthening families to keep them together. Thirteen states include family preservation in their mission statements. One could argue that family preservation and permanency are the same goal. This appears to be true in cases in which children are never removed from the family. In cases in which children are in placement, however, family preservation becomes a process of reuniting and stabilizing a family.

Two states address the value of cultural competence. *Cultural competence* is defined as understanding and respecting cultural differences and needs. Twelve states mention the process of partnering with communities or other agencies. *Partnership* is defined as the collaboration and partnering among agencies, communities, families, or other entities. Table 1 provides a complete list of values, goals, and processes content by state.

Thirty-four states (85%) specifically included safety or protection of children in their state missions. Because safety and protection of children is the primary function of child protection agencies, it was surprising to find that six states did not mention safety as a goal. Five of the six states tended to emphasize self-sufficiency.

Some mission statements emphasize different processes for structuring organizational practice. For example, Kansas, a privatized system, focuses on community partnering:

TABLE 1

Mission Statements: Reading Level and Goals, Values, and Processes Content

State	SMOG RL	Safety	Permanency	WB	PS	FP	SS	Partnership	Prevention	PL	A	CC
AK	12.5	x							x			
AL	16.4	x	x	x	x				x			
AR	10.7	x		x	x	x	x		x			
AZ	19.4	x	x	x	x			x		x		
CT	10.7	x		x		x						
DC	18.5	x	x	x		x		x				x
DE	15.2			x	x					x	x	
FL	12.5	x		x			x	x				
GA	11.4			x	x		x					
HI	15	x	x			x						
IA	17.5	x					x	x				
ID	11	x		x								
IL	14.0	x			x			x	x		x	
IN	10.7						x					
KS	14.0	x	x	x				x			x	
KY	17.5	x				x	x					
LA	15.6	x	x	x	x							
MA	12.5	x	x	x	x	x						
ME	18.5	x		x	x				x			
MI	19.4	x			x	x	x			x		
MO	18.5			x	x		x					
MS	22.0	x				x			x			
MT	8.5	x				x						
NE	21.2	x	x	x								
NH	16.4	x	x	x								
NJ	15.2	x	x			x			x			
NM	12.1	x		x					x			
NV	17.5	x	x			x						
OK	9.7	x			x				x			
OR	10.7	x	x									
RI	18.0	x		x			x	x				x
SC	10.7	x	x	x					x			
SD	15.2	x			x							
TN	22.0				x		x	x				
TX	14.0	x										
UT	10.7	x	x	x				x	x	x		
VT	14.0	x				x		x				
WA	12	x	x		x	x		x				
WV	17.5			x	x		x	x				
WY	14.5	x				x		x				
Total n		34	15	20	17	13	12	12	10	4	3	2
Percentage		85	37.5	50	42.5	32.5	30	30	25	10	7.5	5

Note: Reading level; WB = well-being; PS = provide services; FP = family preservation; SS = self-sufficiency; PL = provide leadership; A = advocacy; CC = cultural competence.

CFP [Children and Family Policy]—The mission of the division is to protect children; promote permanent, nurturing families; and strengthen community partnerships to serve children. Safety and permanency for children cannot be accomplished by the public child welfare agency alone so the division is actively involved in reaching out to other public, private, and community agencies as partners and collaborators in the improvement of child and family well-being. (Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, 2001)

This is in contrast to Delaware, which has a mission more connected to direct services:

Our mission is to provide leadership and advocacy for Delaware's children. Our primary responsibility is to provide and manage a range of services for children who have experienced abandonment, abuse, adjudication, mental illness, neglect, or substance abuse; and we endorse a holistic approach to enable children to reach their fullest potential. (State of Delaware, 2005)

Discussion

This initial glimpse into mission statements in public child welfare agencies suggests a wide variation in clarity, accessibility, and value content. Visibility is an important aspect of accessibility. If an agency's mission statement followed the CWLA (1996) recommendations, it would be readily accessible to employees and the diverse populations served by the agency. Mission statements should be posted on Internet home pages as well as in the public child welfare agencies. Between the first and second review, agencies' mission statements, websites, and web addresses changed. During the time this research was conducted, Florida and Utah added their mission statement to their home website, and four groups removed their mission statements from their websites: the District of Columbia, Georgia, Maine, and Massachusetts.

Only Montana had a mission statement that required less than a 9th-grade level to be comprehended. For most states, the readability of their missions could be improved by shortening the sentences or using shorter words.

The authors expected the federal goals of safety, permanency, and well-being to be among the values in each state's mission. It is worth noting that 15% of the states included in this study did not include safety in their mission statement. Safety is a critical component of child protective services and a major task of each of these agencies. Not referring to safety seems particularly concerning. It is noteworthy that the value of culture competence was found in only two mission statements, those of Washington, DC, and Rhode Island. This is of concern based on the disproportionate numbers of children of color represented in the child welfare system and the increasing focus on culturally competent practice (Children and Family Research Center and Westat, 2001; Green, 2002).

States that maintain a mission of self-sufficiency and exclude safety might consider a review of their mission statements. Seven of the 13 states in this category may have separate departmental philosophies that were not accessible to the general public, but this is unclear. Highlighting the goal of self-sufficiency over safety can jeopardize child safety, particularly in cases in which a child victim recants under pressure and the parents maintain a posture of financial hardship if the breadwinner is asked to leave the home. Situations such as this create conflict for workers who are left without clear guidance in their decisionmaking.

Further research is needed to determine how agencies use mission statements and if they are effective. Delaware has both a mission statement and a vision statement posted on the web. When the department received the Delaware Quality Award for management excellence, however, Cari DeSantis, Secretary of the Delaware Children's Department, cited the department philosophy, "Think of the Child First" (Delaware State News, 2002). How these three guiding statements, and those of other states, work together is a fruitful area for further study.

This research has been a first step to understanding the accessibility, clarity, and values of state-administered public child welfare agencies' mission statements. One of the difficulties in conducting this exploration is the dynamic nature of the Internet. Websites, web addresses, and content change frequently. As the authors found, some states changed their mission statement but did not update it online. In other cases, it appears that the web technician posted what he or she considered to be the state's mission statement, when in fact it was not. The many obstacles to finding accurate and current information about agencies' mission statements in conducting a web search for this study suggests accessibility problems for the general public as well.

Conclusion

There is a view, albeit one which is not yet empirically supported, in the child welfare literature and CWLA (1996) standards, that child welfare agencies should be guided by mission statements. Pecora, Whittaker, and Maluccio (1992) suggested that child welfare agencies need to identify a central mission of services and that the agency mission should be described in programs, brochures, and literature and be considered in policies as well as in the selection and hiring of staff.

Just as the eyes are the window into the soul, the mission statements are the window into the heart of an organization. What does the mission statement represent in public child welfare agencies? What difference, if any, does it make? Because the number of children and families involved with state public child welfare agencies has continued to grow, agencies owe it to their clients, the children they serve, and stakeholders to use best practice management tools to improve performance. Clearly, identifying agency objectives and defining practices in a mission statement may contribute to performance measures and improved service delivery, ultimately benefiting the children served by public child welfare agencies. ♦

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