PART ONE:

You are the new Program Planner working with the Director of the State of Alaska Office of Children's Services (OCS). The Federal Government has required OCS to design an Alaska Children Services Program Plan to address vulnerable children and families as well as the safety, permanence, and well-being of Alaskan children. The model should help organize and systematize program planning, management, and evaluation functions throughout OCS.

The plan must be an outcome based model that focuses OCS energies on achieving and documenting results that can be tracked, and adjusted as necessary to ensure effective, measurable program outcomes and impacts. The plan must also consider resources.

1. What formal planning model would you use to structure this plan so that you can track and monitor the impact of the specific OCS plan program elements related to the Federal Government requirements?
   a. Outline the structure of the models components and process.
   b. Briefly explain why you selected this model.

2. Define a specific program element and activity in the OCS plan that would address one of the following challenges;
   a. attracting and retaining skilled stable OCS workforce
   b. safety of Alaska children
   c. permanence of Alaska children.

3. Identify a measurable outcome and a measurable impact that could be used to track the specific program element and activity you defined

4. Use the planning model structure, components and process that you outlined in 1a above. Create an example of one element in the new Alaska Children Services Program Plan. Include the following;
   a. the specific program element and activity you defined
   b. the measurable outcome and measurable impact you identified
   c. additional specific OCS program components needed to support the development, implementation, and tracing of the program element and activity you defined.
PART TWO:

Ignoring the Press (for the purposes of this exercise), Alaska's child welfare system is watched by all the other four mechanisms mentioned in the article. Each review system requires the social workers (approximately 300) employed by Alaska Office of Children Services (OCS) to spend considerable amount of their time participating, assisting, and responding to the review. As the article points out, OCS is concerned with the rate of return for all the time and effort invested by social workers in these reviews. Remember, social workers are hired to provide direct client services, and any time away from that task is undesirable. Therefore, OCS is interested in conducting a "review of reviews" and devise a plan to streamline them to avoid duplication and make them more effective.

While OCS realizes the distinct importance of each review system, it also realizes that, among other things, the utility of any review system is dependent on the quality of social workers’ participation. Implicit in this realization are the following assumptions:

A. Social workers’ perception of a reviews’ relative importance determines the amount and quality of time spent by social workers in participating, assisting, and responding to each type of review. And
B. The amount and quality of social workers’ participation in turn determines the utility of that review.

Therefore, OCS would like the social workers’ perceptions to inform the decision to streamline the reviews. But, OCS is unsure if its assumptions are valid. Your task is to design and implement a study to test these two assumptions. Briefly outline the study with the following clearly identified:

1. Testable hypotheses
2. Dependent and independent variables (suggestion – a flow chart will be very useful here)
3. Sources of data and methods of collecting that data

Remember, you are not asked to describe the quantitative and/or qualitative tools for data analysis. OCS’ own research staff will assume these responsibilities.
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An Examination of Oversight and Review in the Child Welfare System

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An Examination of Oversight and Review in the Child Welfare System:
The Many Watch the Few Serve the Many

Wendy Whiting Blome
Sue Steib

ABSTRACT. Child welfare agencies are accountable to the community not only because they spend public dollars, but also, most critically, because they are charged with protecting vulnerable children. Over the past three decades multiple oversight processes have been initiated as part of an effort to improve accountability in public child welfare. In agencies around the country an array of advocates and monitors regularly review the performance of individual caseworkers. While caseloads grow in number and complexity the ranks of the workforce have not kept pace. The result is too many people watching too few workers serve too many vulnerable children and families.

This paper examines the cumulative effect of five groups of “watchers” that oversee child welfare services. It suggests that every group of watchers should be able to demonstrate that their activities contribute directly to the achievement of system goals. doi:10.1300/J479v01n03_02 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Child welfare, monitoring, accountability, oversight, review

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OVERVIEW AND PREMISE

Child welfare services are part of the required infrastructure of a community. Like fire and police forces, the child welfare system provides prevention, protection, and service. Child welfare agencies are accountable to the community not only because they spend local, state, and federal dollars, but also, most critically, because they are charged with protecting vulnerable children from abuse and neglect. With accountability comes the need for oversight to assure that services are provided in a timely, efficient, and effective manner. However, over the years the increase in the level of monitoring of child welfare agencies has been matched only by the increase in the number of children and families the agencies must serve. At the same time the preparation and number of child welfare workers has declined to a perilous level. Currently in child welfare there is an untenable equation—the many watch the few serve the many.

This paper will examine five groups of “watchers” that oversee some or all aspects of child welfare services in most jurisdictions. The article will suggest that every group of participants who seek to improve the level or quality of performance of the child welfare system should be able to demonstrate that their activities contribute directly to the achievement of system goals. Additionally, the cumulative effect of multiple watchers on the efficiency and effectiveness of child welfare caseworkers and organizations will be examined.

ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS

Child welfare organizational goals are summarized in the outcomes and measures of the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR). While debated in the field, the CFSR outcomes represent an approach to measuring the safety, permanence, and well-being of children and the services offered to families. States through their management information systems collect additional data to track outcomes and to more specifically reflect their individual agency goals and expectations. The bottom line, however, is that the Federal government will hold the state accountable for meeting the CFSR outcomes. Any oversight program or expenditure that does not help the agency advance in the direction of their mandated goals and the Federal expectations should be evaluated and questioned.
Clearly, the child welfare system struggles to provide the quality and quantity of service children and families need. The press jumps on stories of foster care abuse, children returned to unhealthy homes, and case plans out of compliance. The reaction, however, has frequently been to appoint another group or commission to “watch” the agency. Rarely is the answer to upgrade the workforce by hiring professional social workers, to augment the efforts of workers with additional resources, or to improve the level of supervision available when workers have to make difficult, life-altering decisions for children and families.

**MULTIPLE ACCOUNTABILITIES**

The repetitive reviews of individual cases by Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), court appointed Guardians ad Litem, foster care administrative case reviewers, citizen review boards, internal reviewers, various ad hoc committees created by legislative bodies, plus, the press and courts consume scarce agency and worker time and dollars. Each review process, while having somewhat separate foci, is designed to review the actions of overworked workers and identify more tasks for the worker to perform. Although the court is legally and constitutionally mandated to provide oversight for the executive branch, in this the case child welfare system, reviewers are not routinely measured on the level of permanency, safety, or well-being, their actions directly ensure. The concern here is not that public agencies spending public dollars and discharging a public mandate do not warrant oversight—the issue is the number, intensity, duplication, method, and intent of each review process. Indeed, management literature discusses the challenge of “multiple accountabilities disorder.” “Organizations trying to meet conflicting expectations are likely to be dysfunctional, pleasing no one while trying to please everyone” (Koppell, 2005, p. 95).

It is natural for society to be outraged when children are harmed and to want someone to be held responsible. The child welfare agency is mandated to protect all children, even if their funding only allows full services to some. Society has become more “risk aversive” moving the child welfare field to adopt “. . . new strategies which did not have as their central focus either meeting the needs of children or responding directly to child abuse, but rather were focused on the assessment and the management of risk” (Foster & Wilding, 2000, p. 152).
Other scholars, in reviewing recent history, suggest that the United States is approaching risk as though it were ultimately manageable and predictable (Ferguson, 1997).

The model of child abuse that was offered and was bought by legislatures and the public was the so-called medical model: a distinguishable pathological agent attacking the individual or family that could be treated in a prescribed manner and would disappear. This model does not characterize child abuse accurately, but belief in it leads to public frustration, if not fury, that abuse persists. So identifying child abuse as a problem led to public dissatisfaction with child welfare agencies. . . . (Schorr, 2000, p. 126)

The overwhelming response to concern about the child welfare system has been increasing oversight at local, state, and federal levels. Oversight has not, however, made the structures better able to perform difficult tasks, but has subjected agencies to more criticism and condemnation that negatively affects workforce recruitment and public perception and promotes a crisis-oriented organizational mentality (Malm, Bess, Leos-Urbel, Geen, & Markowitz, 2001).

**IDENTIFYING THE “WATCHERS”**

Citing varied legislative or local authorities, the “watchers” strive to improve the protection of children and services to children and families. This article will review the roles and effects of CASA and Guardians ad Litem, administrative foster care review, and citizen review panels, as well as the courts and the press.

**Guardians Ad Litem and CASA**

The federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (CAPTA) called for the appointment of a Guardian ad Litem in all cases of child abuse and neglect that result in a judicial proceeding (National CASA Association, 2002). The legislation provides that this person, who may be an attorney, a court appointed special advocate, or both, is “. . . to obtain first-hand a clear understanding of the situation and needs of the child and to make recommendations to the court concerning the best interests of the child” (Welte, 2005, p. 2). In 1990, the federal Victims of Child Abuse Act provided that a “. . . court appointed special
advocate shall be available to every victim of child abuse or neglect in the United States that needs such an advocate” (Youngclarke, Ramos, & Granger-Merkle, 2004, p. 110).

In many jurisdictions Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) serve as Guardians ad Litem (Central Missouri Child Advocacy Law Center, 1997). The CASA Program began in 1977 in Seattle, Washington with the goal of recruiting volunteers to serve as advocates and representatives for the long-term interests of children in abuse and neglect cases (Weisz & Thai, 2003). The impetus for creation of the program was the court’s frustration that over-burdened attorneys and caseworkers were unable to provide all of the information necessary for sound judicial decision making (National CASA Association, 2002). The initiative gained momentum through support from several groups, including the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect.

Over 900 CASA programs currently exist (Weisz & Thai, 2003). Supporters of the program suggest CASA volunteers can focus on the well-being of children without having to serve the interests of the parents or the public agency (Youngclarke et al., 2004). Published reviews of CASA programs and, indeed, CASA volunteers themselves, often point out that they are responsible for only one or two children so they can spend more time, develop closer relationships, and gather more detailed information to provide to the courts than can over-burdened public agency child protection staff (Youngclarke et al., 2004; Berliner & Fitzgerald, 1998).

It is hoped that the information provided by CASAs will result in better outcomes for children with regard to safety and timely attainment of permanent placement outside of the foster care system (Weisz & Thai, 2003). Research exploring the effectiveness of CASA is inconclusive. Although several studies suggest that CASA representation is associated with fewer placements, less time in care, and greater likelihood of attaining permanency, some have not found a difference in these outcomes when comparing children who were assigned CASAs with those who were not (Calkins & Millar, 1999). Further, most of the research that has been conducted is lacking in methodological rigor. A systematic analysis of 20 studies found that only one met the reviewers’ criteria for the strongest methodology (Youngclarke et al., 2004).

A national evaluation demonstrated that children with CASAs were less likely to be reunified with their parents or placed with kin (Caliber Associates, 2004). No research to date has measured well-being outcomes of children with respect to CASA involvement (Weisz & Thai,
2003; Youngclarke et al., 2004). Judges, based on CASA recommendations, have ordered more services for children and families (Litzelfelner, 2000), however, research has not determined whether the additional service was available in the community or delivered.

Only a few studies address judicial experiences with CASAs. In a comparative study judges found CASA reports more helpful and more complete than those generated by caseworkers. This was attributed to the volunteer having had more contact with the child (Weisz & Thai, 2003). Additionally, the study found that attorney Guardians ad Litem were less active and less likely to make a home visit to the child when a CASA was assigned. A small, qualitative study of five judges reported that they evaluated CASAs favorably on written reports, verbal testimony, case assessments, appropriateness of recommendation, and provision of new information (Leung, 1996). In another evaluation, however, one judge was quoted as saying he prefers to have children represented by licensed attorneys who may be held accountable in ways that a volunteer cannot (Stack, 2004).

CASA volunteers have access to children’s records, participate in meetings related to the child, and interview the child’s caseworker, attorney, and others with significant information in the case (Weisz & Thai, 2003). Research in one state found that, in general, other parties in the child welfare system rate CASAs favorably, although caseworkers tended to be the least positive. Some caseworkers were concerned that CASAs represent yet one more in a succession of people involved in the lives of children in foster care. Indeed, some of the CASAs participating in the study expressed the same concerns. In commenting on these findings, the researchers suggest caseworkers see themselves as advocates for the best interest of the children and, therefore, may give CASAs less favorable marks (Berliner & Fitzgerald, 1998).

Current studies, even those that suggest positive effects, are drawing comparisons with an over-burdened caseworker. Thus, research results may not demonstrate the need for CASAs as much as affirm the multiple factors that impede the effectiveness of the formal child welfare system. Whether the child benefits or not from CASA intervention, it is the caseworker who is ultimately held accountable for achieving outcomes. Since research has long reported the positive effect of a small caseload on client outcomes (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004; Leung, 1996) an investment in reduced workloads is warranted. If funds are to be spent to support small caseloads, perhaps the investment should be made first in the accountable agency rather than in a parallel review system.
Administrative Review

In the 1970s concern about the foster care system peaked as critics and professionals alike lamented the high number of children in out-of-home care and the increasing length of time children spent in substitute care settings. Through landmark legislation known as P. L. 96-272, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, Congress attempted to bring accountability and oversight to the child welfare system by mandating that states design and implement a method of checks and balances through a system of review. Over twenty-five years later, this portion of the law has been amended only slightly (National Association of Foster Care Reviewers, n.d.).

Passed in 1980, P.L. 96-272 included a requirement that every child in care be reviewed every six months. At least one of the reviews had to be in court, but an administrative review or a citizen review could be substituted for one of the semi annual reviews. The administrative review is open to the child and parents and is conducted by a panel including at least one person who is not in the line of authority for managing the case or delivering the services. Some states have chosen to conduct citizen reviews using review teams consisting of laypersons who receive limited training to familiarize them with the child welfare system and the types of decisions that must be made. Whether a citizen review or an administrative review is conducted it is designed to consider:

- the continued need for and appropriateness of the placement,
- level of compliance with the case plan,
- extent of progress made to alleviate the problems that necessitated placement in foster care, and
- the projected date the child can be returned home or placed for adoption or legal guardianship (National Association of Foster Care Reviewers, n.d.).

States that use the non-court review processes generally issue reports detailing statistics on process variables related to the program, for example, number of cases with a case plan, number of cases in compliance for issuing notice of the review, and reviews with parents and/or children attending (New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). The worker is usually required to send notification to all parties, prepare special reports and forms, and participate in a comprehensive review. The summary written for the review varies by state but
generally describes the progress and problems encountered in achieving the case objectives during the six months preceding the review, and all monitoring information that has been compiled like parent-child visits and parents’ progress in services offered. Additionally, copies of the current and previous case plan and the case record are given to the administrative reviewer in advance of the review (Connecticut Department of Children and Families, 2006). Recommendations offered by the administrative reviewer are binding on the worker and agency.

Administrative review offices track whether the worker has met the safety, permanence, and well-being goals set for the child, not whether holding a review helped achieve these outcomes. Some states seem to be moving the administrative review process toward becoming a quality assurance system to track CFSR variables. To quote one state’s Administrative Case Review Program Annual Report, “It is now most timely to set benchmarks that will reflect the DCYF and DJJS goals and benchmarks that are being developed for the State Program Improvement Plan (PIP) . . .” (New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, 2003, p. 41).

While administrative reviewers may offer useful amendments to the case plan, the reviewer is not held accountable for recommending that the worker secure housing when it is not readily available in the community or for ordering drug treatment when there is a long waiting list. Only the worker must attempt to secure scarce resources, not only for this family, but also for every family and child in his/her caseload. As administrative reviews have been mandated by law since 1980 it is unlikely that they will be eliminated. However, if the agency is to participate in case-by-case reviews it may be of more use to require that the boards aggregate outcome findings to suggest systemic issues. Additionally, the review structure could become part of the agency’s tracking of cases through their quality assurance mechanism.

Citizen Review Panels

In 1996, the U.S. Congress amended the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to mandate citizen review panels (CRP) for child protective services in all states. CRPs are composed of community volunteers who are charged with reviewing and evaluating the functioning of the child protection system (Jones, 2004).

In planning the CRP states were encouraged to include representatives from other review processes in the state such as CASA, foster care review boards, and child death review panels, as well as citizens, university
representatives, police, and advocacy organizations (Kot, Bruner, & Scott, 2001). Thus, even in conceptualizing the CRP duplication was acknowledged.

A document that outlines the purpose and function of CRPs, written for a state, recognized the overlap of review bodies.

The citizen review panels will become one of several bodies/agencies concerned with overseeing child protective services activities, both at the individual case level as well as a systemic level. These include the Office of the Family and Children’s Ombudsman, Child Protective Teams, [agency] internal complaint systems, and a new formal administrative review process available to persons alleged to be perpetrators of child abuse. These various activities appear to be developing largely independently of one another. (Collins, 1998, p. 1)

While CRP recommendations are advisory and not binding on the agency, in one jurisdiction a disagreement regarding a CRP finding requires three levels of social service professionals to override the decision of a volunteer panel.

. . . when the [agency] social worker disagrees with a [citizen review panel] recommendation on a child’s placement, the social worker, supervisor, and area manager must consult the Regional Administrator, who must approve overruling the recommendation of the [panel]. The [panel] may appeal decisions of the Regional Administrator to the Assistant Secretary. (Collins, 1998, p. 5)

Overlap between reviews and casework processes is concerning. Planning needs to occur between the family and the worker who is involved on a regular basis in order to hold all parties accountable to the plan and to amend the plan as necessary. Both practice wisdom and research support the importance of the caseworker-client relationship in helping individuals and families engage in services and achieve positive change (Lee & Ayon, 2004; Shireman et al., 1998; Smithgall, 2003). CRP teams do not, generally, have ongoing, consistent involvement with the family. The development of a trusting relationship between families and caseworkers may be undermined by family involvement in forums with unknown persons, particularly if those persons are overtly critical of the service plan and its implementation.
In some jurisdictions the structure of the citizen review panel may mirror the family team meetings being conducted by the agency caseworkers.

Interested parties who typically participate in early citizen review hearings include children, parents, grandparents, and other family members; substitute care givers; mental health professionals, foster care workers; Guardians Ad Litem; and court appointed special advocates. (Jennings, McDonald, & Henderson, 1996, p. 229)

Not only are the same people who participate in other external and internal reviews invited to be part of the CRP, but also the panel is expected to examine existing management information system reports, conduct case record reviews, and interview the workers, families, and mandated reporters (Kot, Bruner, & Scott, 2001). The extensive data collection often conducted by CRPs may increase the potential for role confusion and redundancy with casework practice and other accountability structures. Further, it does not substitute for methodologically sound evaluation as a basis for decisions about program and policy.

While “. . . to date, no comprehensive evaluations of the role, function, or effectiveness of foster care review boards have been completed” (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004, p. 19) a limited number of studies have been conducted. A study in one state found that citizen reviews provided more in-depth and participatory hearings than the judicial process, however, there was no evidence that case outcomes were positively impacted (Collins, 1998). A study comparing children who received early citizen reviews to a control group did not show statistically significant differences in number of continuances, searches for relatives, number of services planned, number of services provided, permanency plans initiated within 45 days, or number of placements. However, the CRP cases were under court supervision for 64 fewer days when compared to the control group (Jennings, McDonald, & Henderson, 1996).

Proponents of CRP suggest that possible benefits include their ability to recognize patterns in cases that may represent systemic problems and the increasing community ownership and investment in child protection (Kot, Bruner, & Scott, 2001). While a worthwhile goal, a study in one state found that among the multiple panels reviewing individual child welfare cases, many had no requirement to track or compile findings to effect systemic change (Collins, 1998). To quote one observer, “. . . federal government money can be viewed as wasted on efforts that may have the intent of authentic citizen involvement, but that do not ultimately
support systemic change within the federal bureaucracy being evaluated” (Box as cited in Jones, 2004, p. 1119).

Press

The press is known as the fourth estate responsible for reporting on the affairs of government and civil society. Stories about abused and neglected children and the agencies that serve, or do not serve, them adequately have all the requirements for a good article. The press is a “watcher” with multiple venues: television, radio, Internet, and local, state, and national newspapers. Since press coverage is, by definition, public child welfare agency officials are called to respond: What are they going to do about the problem? What changes are they making? Referring to high-profile cases that received considerable media attention a department director said, “In the 90s with the tragedies that happened, people stopped reunifications” (Smith & Donovan, 2003, p. 552). Whether a reduction in reunifications was necessary for safety or clinical reasons was not the issue; the agency was responding in a risk-aversive manner trying to avoid additional negative press coverage. Quoting a child welfare expert and administrator:

The most visible and powerful incidents of child abuse are a tiny and unrepresentative part of the much larger universe of child welfare cases. When horrific crimes lead the public and policy makers to seek scapegoats or create rules to prevent recurrences, they tend to encourage emotionally satisfying but misguided and unwise social policy. (Mattingly as cited in Geen & Tumlin, 1999, p. 9)

The press as a “watcher” may influence the child welfare agency in unanticipated ways. Recruitment of quality staff becomes more difficult when the agency is being regularly attacked in the newspaper. Who wants to work for an agency labeled ineffective or unprofessional?

By focusing on the welfare system’s failures, rather than heralding its successes, the news media misguides public perception. The public should reserve judgment until it reviews the breath of an agency’s performance. As an initial step to rectifying this misguided perception, the media could facilitate public education by offering more balanced views of the child welfare system. (Graf, 1996, p. 112)
Organizations are in a constant process of change as they respond to internal and external stimuli. For child welfare agencies, like all organizations, culture change or systemic transformation takes time and must be supported with consistent administrative messages. In child welfare where massive changes are often externally provoked agencies may never reach a mature level of organizational development.

. . . [this agency] was created out of a media storm in the late 70s and continues to be shaped by the consequences of negative attention. There is a pattern of tearing down the agency every time a bad story breaks and painting the whole system with one broad, negative brush. This pattern has not allowed the agency to move beyond a certain point because there is inevitably that next bad case that begins the cycle all over again. (Geen & Tumlin, 1999, p. 9)

While it makes a good follow-up story to proclaim an agency reorganization, fire an administrator or individual workers, or announce another level of review, the result may be to strangle the agency in non-productive reshuffling, rather than structured, accountable change focused on troubles in agency functioning identified through a data-driven problem solving process.

**FOCUS ON THE AGENCY AND THE COURTS**

Public child welfare agencies work in tandem with the juvenile courts to serve children and families. The judicial branch is constitutionally mandated to oversee the actions of the executive branch. The federal Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980 (P.L. 92-272) markedly expanded the judicial role in child welfare by calling for courts of juvenile jurisdiction to exercise an ongoing monitoring function of all cases in which children are placed in the protective custody of public agencies (Hardin, 1996; Knepper & Barton, 1997). The child welfare and legal literature contain ample documentation of factors that hamper the ability of courts to expedite the placement of children in safe and permanent homes. These include crowded court dockets, deficient case tracking systems, and judges and attorneys who lack training in the special demands of child dependency courts (Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2004). Additionally, problems in the relationship between courts and child welfare agencies (Malm et al., 2001) and judicial practices, like rotating judges and attorneys, may thwart the ability of the court to make comprehensive decisions (Ellett & Steib, 2005).
Currently workers spend hours preparing reports for court and the other “watchers” who require information. It is reasonable to conclude that the quality and timeliness of reports to the mandated watcher—the court—would improve if other documentation was reduced or eliminated. Judges value the recommendations of caseworkers. When asked to rate who was the most influential voice in helping them form decisions judges indicated that they strongly or very strongly relied on the recommendations or testimony of the caseworker. Specifically, in 73% of the 202 cases reviewed by 37 judges participating in a study, the caseworker’s opinion was the most significant of all the participants in the court proceeding (Steib, 2001).

Courts and child welfare agencies each has a clearly defined role in assuring child safety and permanency; the multiple watchers’ functions are less clear. “Child protection workers, guardians ad litem, and judges are all directed to act on behalf of the best interests of the child. That an additional independent voice for these best interests is needed suggests that there are failures in the other three groups to meet their obligations” (Weisz & Thai, 2003, p. 205). Might it not be more advisable to spend the funds necessary to bolster the capacity of the courts and the child welfare system to conduct the level and intensity of review needed to properly assess children and their families, rather than to support multiple, time-consuming oversight mechanisms?

**FOCUSING ON THE FEW**

How did the “few” workers responsible for permanency, safety, and well-being of children become so few? The current status of the child welfare system is inexorably linked to its history. When the White House Conference on Children convened in 1909 the care of children was a respected vocation.

...in this early period public child welfare worked toward being an elite service—dedicated to children, with well-trained staff and high morale. (Schorr, 2000, p. 125)

That perspective lasted for more than 50 years.

Until the final quarter of the 20th century, the nation’s developing child welfare system enjoyed a more favorable reputation. Although agencies struggled with inadequate resources and practice
suffered from rudimentary knowledge about children’s developmental needs and intervention effectiveness, child welfare tended to be viewed as a desirable area of practice. . . . This hopeful picture changed rapidly in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the enactment of child abuse and neglect reporting laws. Unfortunately, that well-intentioned response to the growing recognition of child maltreatment was not accompanied by adequate preparation on the part of either agencies or schools of social work. Unable to handle the ensuing avalanche of child maltreatment reports, public agencies quickly reduced qualifications for child welfare work in order to increase the number of available, affordable staff. The real beginning of today’s troubled system may be traced to those years. (Steib & Blome, 2003, p. 747)

Subsequent laws added to the mandated responsibilities carried by the child welfare system. Initially investigations focused on serious physical injury; newer laws have added sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse and physical, educational, or medical neglect. Further the list of mandated reporters has expanded to generate more reports for evaluation. This happened in the context of diminishing resources and socioeconomic changes that increased the number of families coming to the attention of the child welfare agencies (Geen & Tumlin, 1999).

The “many” children and families who are referred for services from the child welfare agency have increased significantly since advent of the formal child protection system.

The state mandated reporting laws resulted in a meteoric rise in child abuse reports across the United States. In 1962 . . . there had been about 10,000 child abuse reports. By 1976 child abuse reports had risen to more than 669,000 and by 1978 to 836,000. (Lindsey, 1996, ¶ 3)

The last decade has seen a leveling of the number of reports received. Using data collected by each state the federal Children’s Bureau estimated a total of 3 million referrals for approximately 5.5 million children were made to public child welfare agencies in 2004 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). In response, agencies moved, by default, to “. . . increasing ‘proceduralization’ and ‘bureaucratization’ and . . . from professional-style education towards competency-based training. Both of these developments contributed to an erosion of professional autonomy and influence” (Foster & Wilding, 2000, p. 151).
Child welfare organizations now wrestle with high turnover and vacancy rates (American Public Human Services Association, 2005). Workers say they have more clerical work, less decision-making authority, and less time to spend with children and families (Malm et al., 2001).

...excessive paperwork requirements can be the antithesis of accountability. They keep workers behind their desks, robbing them of time to work directly with children and families. They encourage management to displace the goal of delivering high quality services with the goal of delivering high quality paperwork. And they provide a serious disincentive to getting and keeping skilled people in the field. (O’Donnell, 1992, p. 265)

Paperwork consumes between 50 and 80% of caseworkers’ time. In one state they were required to complete 150 forms per child (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Each level of external reviews adds to the burden of documentation placed on the worker (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004). Most watchers require the worker to complete a unique form created for their sole use.

Compounding the hardship on workers is the number of complicated, multi-problem children and families they serve. Increases in the number of workers have not kept pace with the growth in the number of cases. Not surprisingly, large caseloads limit the amount of time and attention caseworkers can give to individual clients and, most importantly, dilute their capacity to maintain a close relationship with children and families (Leung, 1996).

Politicians, managers and users may now be attacking traditional welfare professionals’ autonomy so hard that some of the most beneficial aspects of professional service are in danger of being lost. (Foster & Wilding, 2000, p. 157)

Indeed, the Child and Family Service Reviews, the Federal assessment of public state child welfare agencies, has found that insufficient staff contributed to agencies’ inability to meet outcome measures (General Accounting Office, 2003). Conversely, when workers did visit children and families frequently and consistently performance on child well-being measures was stronger (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

Having enough staff is one problem; having staff with the right preparation is another. Social work degrees, particularly those obtained from
schools offering a concentrated focus on child welfare, are linked with better service outcomes (Huebner, 2003), higher levels of readiness for practice (Fox, Burnham, Barbee, & Yankeelov, 2000) and greater staff retention or expressed intent to remain (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett, 2000). However, fewer than 15% of child welfare agencies require caseworkers to hold an undergraduate or graduate social work degree (General Accounting Office, 2003). Many of today’s public agencies may be challenged to attract a professional workforce because the agency offers an environment in which front line staff are not allowed to use the knowledge and skills students have gained in schools of social work. Graduates want to be able to work directly with children and families using strengths-based, family focused approaches within a context of independent decision making, supportive supervision, and professional respect. As noted by one long time observer of public child welfare:

Congress decided to legislate the content of their work, state legislatures enacted 24-hour response times and 6-month reviews, regulations descended on local agencies in an ungentle snow, and administrators and supervisors became more prescriptive in more and more detail. The line worker’s job became routine and simple-minded—in short, stultifying. (Schorr, 2000, p. 127)

Additionally, on average, salaries are markedly lower in child welfare than for nurses, public school teachers, police officers, and firefighters (American Public Human Services Association, 2005). Serving children and families, however, requires consistently long days, after-hour responsibilities that interfere with personal family life, and stressful decision making. The payoff is low public recognition for positions that require a high level of commitment and skill (Alwon & Reitz, 2000). Agencies that have made progress in raising salaries, eliminating overtime, and not requiring on-call work have been rewarded with reduced recurrence of child maltreatment and more effective agency functioning (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2006).

While recruiting staff is a continual challenge, retaining trained workers is a necessity if children and families are to achieve the best outcomes. Child welfare agencies struggle with average turnover rates of over 22% for front line staff (American Public Human Services Association, 2005). The problem is compounded by slow hiring processes. “The average number of weeks required to fill vacant positions varied from a low of 7 weeks for in-home protective service workers to 10 weeks for CPS workers and 13 weeks for foster care and adoption workers”
Further, studies have demonstrated the link between caseworker consistency and positive client outcomes (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005; Potter & Klein-Rothschild, 2002). High turnover devastates the child welfare system and leaves caseloads uncovered and client needs unattended.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There comes a point when additional review, further oversight, and more monitoring becomes an end unto itself. Witness an example from a large child welfare agency:

...in the past 20 years there have been at least four dozen studies, audits, analyses and evaluations of the perceived disarray in the City’s child welfare policies and program. Indeed, analyzing the City’s child welfare agency has become a veritable industry in itself. Numerous boards, committees and commissions have been formed by several Mayors, the Courts, the City and State Controllers, Borough Presidents, the Public Advocate, the city council, other officials and non-government entities to study, monitor and/or reform all or parts of the system. (Geen & Tumlin, 1999, p. 10)

Multiple watchers dilute the attention and siphon funds available for the mandated review and the service delivery system.

...more oversight cannot address the fundamental need for more skilled casework decision making in child welfare. Monitors cannot and should not serve as caseworkers. Nor will more monitoring yield more skilled clinical judgment. Second, unless the role of monitors is clearly delineated they can unwittingly reduce, rather than strengthen, accountability. . . . (O’Donnell, 1992, p. 263)

Child welfare workers may be unique among mandated public servants in the frequency and degree of external inquiry to which they are subjected. All recipients of public dollars have some accountability processes, however, child welfare submits to decision-by-decision scrutiny by duplicative bodies with incongruous intent and contradictory methods.

Agencies now have the ability to track and monitor entry and exit cohort data and to interpret the data to inform programmatic change (Courtney, Needell, & Wulczyn, 2004). This is a more efficient and
timely means of recognizing problems and addressing them on a systemic basis rather than examining cases one by one. Individual case review needs to be done by the worker, supervisor, and clinical team with the family and changes put in place immediately to affect the outcomes for children and families. Waiting for a scheduled review gives the impression that decision making can be postponed and that the worker should delay action pending input from the watcher. In truth, the worker must make decisions on a daily and weekly basis as driven by the pulse of the case, not the flip of the calendar.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. There is little empirical support for the effectiveness of the external watchers. The evidence that suggests that they may offer some benefit does so only in contrast with public systems that are clearly under-resourced. The history of the “watchers” as outlined in this article suggests that all were conceived as a means of compensating for deficits in the functioning of the mandated public system. Perhaps it is time to focus on measures that actually bolster the capacity of child welfare agencies and courts to serve vulnerable children and families, rather than continuing to rely on multiple watchers to try to ensure accountability.

   *The child welfare system must be given the funds to make systemic reforms and advance service delivery through the use of a stable, professional workforce without the burden of responding to the demands of conflicting and duplicative watchers.*

2. It has been argued that external review generates community interest and support for child welfare. While it is important to have an involved and knowledgeable citizenry, it should not be expressed through the review of individual cases. Rather advocates might concern themselves with promoting systemic reforms such as quality assurance measures, sound program evaluation, and most importantly, the development and support of a competent, professional workforce.

   *Child welfare agencies need advocates to engage in lobbying for essential supports such as expert case supervision, competitive*
salaries, professional level workers, and staff development designed to help workers apply best practices to vulnerable children and families.

3. Reviewers of court performance in child dependency cases are calling for courts to become active partners with child welfare in measuring safety and permanency for children. Efforts to improve the court system not only have established benchmarks, but also have identified specific data collection strategies for courts (American Bar Association, 2004). “Outcome measures are needed to track achievement of the distinct goals of courts and those goals they share with child welfare agencies” (Flango, 2001, p. 158).

Courts and child welfare agencies need to share accountability for a set of common outcomes for children.

4. The court must be fully able to exercise its responsibility for protecting the legal rights of parties involved with the child welfare system and providing broad oversight to ensure safety and permanence.

Courts need the capacity to hear child dependency cases with sufficient frequency and detail, standards for legal representation of children and families, development of uniform judicial performance measures, and training on issues related to child maltreatment.

5. In public agencies changes in budgets and leadership often result in fluctuations in the core capacities necessary to serve children and families. Similarly the court often lacks capacity to provide the level of oversight needed to assure high quality services to children and families. Both the courts and child welfare agencies have taken responsibility for promoting efforts to improve their functioning. Among many other initiatives, some public agencies are pursuing accreditation through a national body. Compliance with a set of national standards, for example, the Council on Accreditation (COA) standards for public agencies, may help achieve and maintain quality despite political transformations within a state. Accrediting bodies in child welfare establish caseload sizes, supervision ratios, and professional credentials for practice (Council on Accreditation, 2006). Agencies striving to attain accreditation invest in expanded training, require staff to pursue BSW and MSW
level education, and assess the organizational structure to assure that it supports service delivery. Most importantly, COA accreditation standards are grounded in evidence-based literature to assure that agencies are investing staff time and monetary resources in programs that represent what is currently understood to be best practice.

For the courts, the resource guidelines established by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (1995) similarly purport a series of approaches to ensure thoroughness, consistency, and timeliness of judicial review in child welfare cases. Whether funded through Federal Court Improvement Projects or local sources, courts that emulate national standards and recommendations are best able to work collaboratively with the child welfare system to achieve established outcomes. While the research on the effects of accreditation and court guidelines is in its infancy, the initiatives stem from evidence based review of the literature and expert assessments.

Legislatures or advocates interested in improving the outcomes of the child welfare system might consider supporting states in efforts to meet national accreditation standards and courts in complying with nationally accepted recommendations.

6. Consistently negative media coverage can only add to the well-documented difficulty that child welfare agencies experience in recruiting and retaining qualified service delivery personnel. Armed with accurate information about the operation of agencies and courts, advocates can play a powerful role in leveraging more balanced media coverage when crises occur and in drawing media attention more routinely to the system’s positive initiatives and outcomes.

Advocacy groups should have organized procedures for proactively relating to the media and routinely calling public attention to the needs of the formal child welfare system.

In sum, when observers of the child welfare system note consistent deficiencies the better response might be to seek the source of the problems rather than to succumb to the allure of establishing another layer of “watchers.” The many watching the few serve the many has not worked. It is time to try the “few watching the many serve the vulnerable.”
NOTES

1. The citizen review option allowed under PL 96-272 should not be confused with the mandated citizen review panels created in 1996 as part of the amendments to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA).
2. Each state is required to prepare a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to address needs identified in the Federal Child and Family Services Review.
3. COA Public Agency Standards 8th Edition do allow substituting a “comparable degree” for the MSW or a degree in “a comparable human service field with two years of related experience” for the BSW (COA, PA-CPS 14.01; 14.02; PA-FC 18.01; 18.05).

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