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# Capacity Assessment and Integration Support for the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families

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Final Report  
Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago  
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*The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families or the Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration in the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services.*

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# Glossary of Key Terms

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Infrastructure: The resources, structures, and capacities needed to implement and sustain a performance improvement function.

Outcomes: Measurable of child, youth and family well-being that pertain to program results.

Performance: The observable, measurable, and quantifiable aspects of process and the targets and benchmarks associated with identified goals and outcomes.

Performance improvement: A system that supports an “agency’s values, vision and mission through ongoing data and information collection and analysis and the regular use of quality improvement results to make decisions, improve practice and achieve better outcomes for children and families.”

Performance measures: Quantifiable aspects of agency programming and practice that influence performance. Much of this information is already collected on a routine basis and is influenced by policy, processes, supervision, and the daily practices within agencies and providers.

Population outcomes for children, youth, and families: The measures that DCYF has selected to guide agency priorities and directions regarding the “population’s dynamic state of physical, mental, and social well-being” (Parrish, 2010). These include resilience, education, and health.

Priorities: A limited set of performance, process, and infrastructure activities of elevated importance based on existing evidence, anticipated impacts, and role in driving change and improvement.

Process: The routines and feedback mechanisms involved in quality assurance and improvement, involving the meaningful use of evidence needed to implement and sustain a performance improvement function.

Quality Assurance: “The planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Quality Improvement: “A systematic and formal approach to the analysis of practice performance and efforts to improve performance.”<sup>[2]</sup>

# Abstract

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In Washington, people of color and economically disadvantaged communities are disproportionately engaged with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities are evident in measures of population well-being from birth through early adulthood. Hence, the integration of Washington’s legacy agencies providing services for children, youth, and families across the developmental continuum—Children’s Administration, the Department of Early Learning, and Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration, respectively—into the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) presented a unique opportunity for the state: it was afforded the chance to take stock of its performance measures, processes, and infrastructure on how child- and family-serving human services agencies evaluate the quality of their service delivery, identify areas for improvement, and invest in opportunities to not only enhance service delivery but also to promote well-being among the population.

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago was contracted to assess the strengths and areas for growth in DCYF’s current performance improvement system. Using a *gap analysis* approach, Chapin Hall drew on five mixed-methods tasks—a policy review, an evidence and practice review, process mapping, system reform case studies, and data appraisal and performance analyses—to detail how the service areas, specifically, and DCYF, broadly, are executing a performance improvement system relative to existing state and federal policy, scientific and grey literature, and best practices from exemplar jurisdictions. Findings point to notable strengths across the service areas in how DCYF executes performance improvement activities, as well as areas for growth, particularly around the processes and infrastructure for evidence generation, dissemination, and application in the performance improvement cycle. In response to these areas for growth, Chapin Hall highlighted how DCYF can increase its capacity for performance improvement related to performance measurement, staff capacity, and agency buy-in.

In short, this report captures the myriad performance improvement activities ongoing across DCYF, articulates the gold standards in performance improvement, and makes recommendations to drive Washington to better understand and continuously improve its performance in pursuit of improving the lives of the state’s children, youth, and families.

# Executive Summary

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## Motivation

In 2017, the Washington State legislature passed House Bill 1661, which mandated the creation of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), a single agency, to assume and integrate the collective functions of the Children’s Administration, the Department of Early Learning, and Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration—the state’s child welfare (CW), early learning (EL), and juvenile justice (JJ) agencies, respectively. This integration provided a unique opportunity for Washington to take stock of its performance measures, processes, and infrastructure underlying critical human services intended to improve quality of life and outcomes for children, youth, and families.

At the behest of the State, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago conducted the baseline performance assessment; this involved investigating the policy mandates that drive services, the character and quality of service delivery, and the existing indicators of service delivery and outcomes, with a focus on illuminating areas for investment that will enrich the state’s improvement opportunities. These improvement opportunities are intended to enhance service delivery while also promoting well-being across the population. The aim of this work was to provide recommendations on how to knit together an integrated performance improvement (PI) system, building on the strengths of the legacy agencies that DCYF inherited.

In Washington, communities with people of color and economically disadvantaged communities are disproportionately engaged with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in measures of population well-being and access to high-quality services and supports are evident from birth through early adulthood. Thus, this work involved the application of an equity lens and our report includes information about how DCYF might address disparities and disproportionalities through agency improvement.

This report details the methods, findings, and recommendations that emerged from a year-long study conducted in close partnership with the Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability. Chapin Hall’s baseline performance assessment centered on a *gap analysis* to illuminate DCYF’s baseline performance and its existing PI processes and infrastructure, comparing and contrasting it with an improved future state. The assessment was intended to 1) take stock of the *current state* of agency performance in child welfare, early learning, juvenile justice, and overall at DCYF ; and to 2) review scientific and grey literature, best practices from exemplar jurisdictions, and policy guidance to inform recommendations to drive agency performance towards an *ideal future state*.

## Guiding Framework

Performance improvement (PI), also known as continuous quality improvement (CQI), involves a cyclical, systematic approach to monitoring and strengthening program implementation using evidence-based decision making and a focus on program accountability and problem solving. PI functions are those routines and activities that provide an opportunity for agencies to design, test, and scale program- and system-level improvements in response to evidence. When an agency can develop, test, and refine potential improvements, it is better equipped to deliver services and supports that are responsive to population needs.

We designed the framework to anchor this assessment to synthesize our findings into an action plan for DCYF based on three essential components of performance improvement—*performance, process, and infrastructure*—from which agency *priorities* can emerge.

- **Performance:** The observable, measurable, and quantifiable aspects of process and the targets and benchmarks associated with identified goals and outcomes.
- **Process:** The routines and feedback mechanisms involved in quality assurance and improvement, involving the meaningful use of evidence needed to implement and sustain a performance improvement function.
- **Infrastructure:** The resources, structures, and capacities needed to implement and sustain a performance improvement function.
- **Priorities:** A limited set of performance, process, and infrastructure activities of elevated importance based on existing evidence, anticipated impacts, and role in driving change and improvement.



## Approach

The following questions guided our work:

1. What should child welfare, early learning and juvenile justice agencies measure in terms of outcomes and drivers of performance measures (i.e., outcomes)? What processes and infrastructure should child welfare, early learning and juvenile justice agencies have in place to support performance improvement?

2. What does DCYF measure in terms of performance measures (i.e., outcomes) and drivers of these measures? What does DCYF have in place in terms of processes and infrastructure to support performance improvement?

To address these questions, we composed five teams organized functionally to complete requisite tasks designed to address the questions above.

- **Policy review:** Analyze guiding federal and state policy, practice, and regulation to determine the extent of alignment with federal and state mandates, and to identify common and distinct cross-departmental obligations as they relate to PI.
- **Evidence and practice review:** Identify service area outcomes and best practices in PI through grey and academic literature searches, along with interviews with system experts and practitioners from exemplar agencies, to guide recommendations around the establishment of a robust PI system and priority measures.
- **Process mapping:** Review three specific performance improvement processes (CW: translate Child Family Service Review to Performance Improvement Plan; EL: share Mobility Mentoring information; JJ: inform community re-entry) and map how evidence is generated, disseminated, and applied to guide performance monitoring and support improvement efforts.
- **Case studies:** Apply a framework drawn from implementation science drivers associated with sustainable implementation to three examples of deep system reform efforts (CW: Family Assessment Response; EL: Early Achievers; JJ: Diagnostic Redesign) to identify recommendations for opportunities to build the necessary infrastructure to implement and sustain reform initiatives.
- **Data appraisal and performance analysis:** Map and characterize existing administrative data holdings relative to measures identified in policy guidance, the evidence base, and best practice. Collaborate with DCYF to complete data tables about current performance. Draw on publicly available sources of data to present state-by-state comparisons on key performance measures. Provide recommendations on gaps in existing data collection, analysis and application to improve performance within and across the agency.

To understand how DCYF executes PI functions across the three service areas, we focused on the following areas of service provision:

- For **child welfare**, we focused on services for children with child welfare involvement and for youth in extended foster care. We also examined the foster caregiver workforce and the DCYF child welfare staff.
- In **early learning**, we examined three specific programs: home visiting (i.e., the suite of programs funded by the Home Visiting Services Account), Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (i.e., early intervention), and the Early Childhood Education Assistance Program (i.e., preschool).
- We focused on the entire continuum of **juvenile justice** services from adjudication through release into the community.

# Key Findings

## Performance

We investigated the CW, EL, and JJ performance measures that agencies should capture, and we took stock of DCYF’s current data holdings, highlighting discrepancies between what was available and what policy, the evidence base, and best practice recommend agencies capture. In order to categorize necessary performance measures, we focused on four segments of the system continuum that require thoughtful and deliberate measurement:

**System dynamics:** At the agency level, understanding who comes into contact with each service area/program and when is important because interventions are specific to the needs, assets, challenges, and supports of the service population.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* An agency needs to understand which subpopulations have access to services, particularly preventive early learning services, to understand who can benefit from interaction with the system. It is also critical to know which subpopulations disproportionately engage with the system, particularly for child welfare and juvenile justice.

**Key drivers.** These measures include the system of care and the workforce. Below, we present a set of high priority drivers from policy and evidence that are empirically linked with measures of child, youth, and family well-being.

- The *system of care* measures reflect what the agency does or provides to families it serves. For example, in early learning, an essential system of care measure would be exposure environments that promote healthy development.
- Assessing the skills and capacity of the *workforce* are areas of measurement that are, to some extent, within the sphere of influence of an agency to change.
- ❖ *Equity implication:* Key drivers of outcomes point to variability across demographic subgroups in interactions with the system of care and the workforce can explain disparities in outcomes.

Child Welfare	Early Learning	Juvenile Justice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High quality foster caregiver network</li><li>• Services to meet child and family needs</li><li>• Training for staff, stakeholders</li><li>• Workforce stability</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use and availability of early learning programs</li><li>• Program quality</li><li>• Family engagement in services and supports</li><li>• Staff capacity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Re-entry planning</li><li>• Assessment of youth’s risk and needs</li><li>• Evidence-based, rehabilitative programming</li><li>• Facility quality and safety</li><li>• Staff capacity</li></ul>

**Child, youth, and family outcomes:** An agency must have a set of child and family outcomes that are specific to the population it serves and linked to available programs and a theory of change. These measures reveal whether the services an agency provides achieve their aims.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* These measures can also serve as leading indicators for progress toward population outcome goals and can illuminate disparities in outcomes associated with system engagement.

Where possible, we also present state-by-state comparisons for WA to understand its performance in the national context. These findings point to areas of strength and opportunities for improvement across the service areas, but there is evidently greater opportunity for WA to improve its performance by enhancing the drivers of child, youth, and family outcomes, rather than investing in efforts to benchmark the agency's progress against other states.

## Process

We focus on two overarching elements of PI processes: the relationship between quality assurance and quality improvement and a process for evidence use.

We highlight what policy guidance and best practices indicate about **quality assurance** (QA) and **quality improvement** (QI) in human services agencies and describe these processes across the service areas. The findings showed that child welfare has the most robust QA and QI processes, which are dictated by federal and state policies. In early learning, a quality rating improvement system to rate early childhood programs was only recently adopted, but it reflects a commitment to QI. In juvenile justice, there is broad attention to quality assurance around the implementation fidelity for evidence-based programs.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* Together, QA and QI processes ensure that human services agencies do their work well and continue to improve, which permits agencies to identify the programs and services that work best for specific subpopulations and to scale them appropriately.

Additionally, we describe the **process of meaningful evidence use**, meaning how departments convert administrative data into evidence that are disseminated for interpretation and used to inform decision making. Our findings highlight agency-wide challenges around generating evidence in line with best practice. Across the service areas, execution of these processes varies considerably, with more routine and codified processes existing in child welfare than in early learning or juvenile justice.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* Evidence generation processes can attend to differences across population subgroups that highlight disproportionalities and disparities. Disseminating evidence can provide opportunities to engage diverse voices in the interpretation of findings. Evidence for program improvement should be applied to reduce disparities.

## Infrastructure

We highlighted the broad domains of infrastructure needed for PI—**workforce human capital** (e.g., capacity, stability, etc.), **technical resources**, and **agency culture**. Using interviews with DCYF staff and findings from process mapping and the case studies, we presented snapshots of the existing infrastructure for PI across the service areas. Across all of the service areas, we heard about commitments to improving the workforce through training and professional development. The existing technical resources, or data systems, were most comprehensive and useful to analysts in child welfare, but existing systems were difficult to access in juvenile justice and did not permit linking children across the array of programs in early learning. In recent years, all of the service areas have made valuable investments that reflected the emerging adoption of a learning culture across the legacy agencies.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* Having well-trained staff with low turnover, as well as an agency culture sensitive to the needs of the population, promotes supportive engagement, enhances the continuity of care, and reduces the re-traumatization of children, youth, and families when interacting with agency services.

## Priorities

We draw attention to agency-level priorities that reflected potential areas of investment for DCYF to strengthen its performance improvement system and elements of service delivery. At the agency level, priorities have coalesced around aligning the measurement to broader child outcome goals, an important indicator of a performance improvement culture. Agency priorities are also evident in DCYF's stated interest in aligning programs and services to the developmental continuum and providing critical prevention and early intervention programs to young children and families.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* The implementation of prevention programs and the broad attention to the specific developmental needs of each child, youth, and family an agency serves can permit it to better serve the population and potentially reduce the need for other services in the long-term.

We also provided a set of priority measures, drawing on the findings related to performance measurement that are relevant to the service areas and programs. From this set of measures, we elevate a select number of measures that are common across the service areas and that the agency could use to monitor system-level performance.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* It is not possible to reduce disproportionalities and disparities without first being able to produce evidence of these conditions at program and system levels.

**Children in Washington**  
 “grow up safe and healthy – thriving physically, emotionally, and academically.”

**Resilience**

Ability to adapt and thrive despite adversity

**Education**

Attainment, proficiency, and growth

**Health**

Physical and mental health and well-being

**Protect children and strengthen families so they flourish by:**

- Laying a strong foundation for healthy development by prioritizing early learning and prevention and early intervention from birth through adolescence
- Addressing trauma, inequity, and barriers to health and well-being in the population
- Supporting children, youth, and families through key transitions to adulthood

**Child Welfare**

Safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families

**Early Learning**

Quality care, education, and developmental supports for young children and their

**Juvenile Justice**

Prepare clients for productive lives and families and communities to support re-entry

## Recommendations

In light of our findings, we highlight three broad recommendations in areas in which DCYF can make investments in capacity. Each recommendation has corresponding action items that DCYF can immediately catalyze to strengthen its PI system. The tables below describe each of these recommendations in more detail and contextualize each of the action items by discussing their importance at the program and agency levels.

**Recommendation 1 is to increase capacity for measurement aligned with policy and best practice.** We make this recommendation because measurement will allow the agency to generate the evidence it needs to support key decision making. Understanding who an agency serves (and does not serve), what services it delivers, how it delivers them, and what occurs as a results is essential.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* Flexible measurement can help identify and monitor existing and emerging disproportionalities and disparities. The ability to disaggregate data by sub-population can also reveal whether particular subpopulations lack access to quality services. Staff should validate new and existing measures and instruments to ensure their cultural relevance and appropriate characterizations of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and tribal affiliation.

**Action Item 1. Validate a core set of performance indicators** that capture both agency performance and specific outcomes, by program or service areas and for agency globally that are standardized across service areas where possible, aligned with the evidence base, and adhere to policy guidance. We proposed a reduced set of priority measures that evidence and policy empirically support as drivers of program performance and that DCYF can standardize across service areas. We also elevate a set of agency-level performance measures.

**Action Item 2. Improve analytic capacity among program analysts and enhance capacity for data capture to support analysis of performance data at various levels,** both “drilling down” and aggregating up, to identify disparities by sociodemographic characteristics of children, youth, and families and to understand trends across different units of analysis. Analysts should be able to represent variation in children and youth’s experiences interacting with the agency because this variability may determine clients’ outcomes. For these reasons, being able to analyze information at various levels is essential to understanding that variation, particularly since children across the service areas are nested in families, in programs, and in regions, which are chief sources of variation.

**Action Item 3. Incorporate measures on protective factors** that are developmentally-appropriate and standardized across the agency. We present a framework developed for the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families that draws on protective factors at the individual, relationship, and community levels to elevate traits and skills that the literature shows promote well-being and resilience among vulnerable children and youth.

**Recommendation 2 is to increase the capacity to generate and meaningfully use evidence.** This is important because agencies need to transform the large volumes of data they collect into evidence that staff can effectively use for decision making. Evidence is required at all stages of the plan-do-study-act cycle, which is at the heart of performance improvement. To that extent, performance improvement activities are only as strong as the available evidence.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* The ability to communicate and co-interpret evidence at the program level with a broad array of stakeholders can amplify client, community, and workforce voices in agency practice and policy.

**Action Item 4. Construct an integrated administrative data system** that facilitates linkages across service areas and permits tracking child, youth, and families over time and across systems to produce a holistic picture of well-being and system engagement. This asset would mean that DCYF would be able to track children, youth, and families from their first exposure to the agency over time. Plotting the pathways they take following participation in prevention or intervention programming would arm the agency with actionable evidence about impact of prevention and intervention efforts, key developmental transitions for children and families, and opportunities for improvement.

**Action Item 5. Train analysts to follow measurement best practices** for generating evidence from available data and set agency-wide standards around the type of evidence leadership needs to inform decision making. DCYF collects a tremendous amount of information about its clients and system, but the extent to which programs transform these data into evidence to inform a rigorous performance improvement cycle is limited. By exploring longitudinal analyses and focusing on entry cohorts, meaning the group of children or youth who enter a system at the same time, DCYF can produce more valuable information about child, youth, and family trajectories of involvement with the agency.

**Action Item 6. Require a “validation sub routine,”** including routine meetings to interpret and engage with evidence. We found that, in some programs, having routine processes for data dissemination and information sharing promoted performance improvement processes and contributed to strengthened staff morale through enhanced communication and collaboration.

**Action Item 7. Engage diverse perspectives in the interpretation of evidence** by 1) establishing cross-service area workgroups for evidence reviews, 2) requiring all programs to involve external stakeholders in regular reviews of agency performance, and 3) ensuring that evidence is presented to leadership. Our findings highlighted the value of bringing diverse external perspectives to the table for co-interpretation. One way to do this work is to leverage interdepartmental workgroups and ensure that any documentation from these groups is available to wider feedback and comment. Agencies can leverage such workgroups by rallying members around shared goals, clearly articulated motivations, and support from leadership.

**Recommendation 3 is to increase capacity to affect system change in agency structure and culture.** Ultimately, performance improvement practices thrive in an agency culture that invests in the technological and human capital needed to change how they work. Agency leadership can help to set expectations, model thoughtful and sensitive approaches to the work, and establish a culture of improvement.

- ❖ *Equity implication:* Attention to an agency’s capacity to change relies on a diverse and competent workforce with sufficient skills and resources. Agency culture can facilitate staff commitment to these goals by emphasizing the value of learning, self-improvement, and equity in all facets of agency operations, especially with regard to cultural sensitivity and awareness of system-inflicted traumas.

**Action Item 8. Codify how the department conducts performance improvement to align with federal and state mandates** and to standardize and institutionalize agency expectations for performance improvement beyond these mandates. Policies help to systematize and organize practices in human services agencies, and in DCYF, each service area has its own set of federal and state policies that reference performance improvement. As such, there are opportunities for DCYF to establish departmental guidance on how to operationalize PI mandates in federal and state policies governing the service areas.

**Action Item 9. Train staff to participate in performance improvement activities**, such as monitoring and program fidelity, and use the results to improve the quality and effectiveness of their services. Across the programs and service areas, there is much variability in the exposure that staff have to well-embedded, rigorous performance improvement structures. DCYF has an opportunity to establish a common threshold for staff understanding of and their role in improved agency functioning.

**Action Item 10. Train all staff to consider the impact of trauma and culture** when making meaning of data and to engage families and youth in the performance improvement process. It would be valuable for DCYF to ensure that all staff are equipped with the resources to address child, youth, and family needs in ways that are trauma-informed and culturally sensitive. There are also opportunities for leadership to be strategic about the type of culture it institutes across the agency to ensure that staff at all levels approach their work with these considerations in mind.

## Conclusion

In short, the findings from the baseline performance assessment highlight a wealth of strengths related to performance improvement that exist across DCYF as vestiges of the legacy agencies. Assessing the performance measures, processes, infrastructures, and priorities side-by-side across the service areas has permitted Chapin Hall to highlight valuable areas of investment that will drive DCYF towards becoming a best in class human services agency that attends to the needs of children, youth, and families from the prenatal stage through early adulthood.

This assessment represents Chapin Hall's view of DCYF's baseline performance in the year between when CA and DEL merged and prior to the integration of JR, which is scheduled for July 2019. Upon receipt of this report in May 2019, DCYF will receive its first glimpse into our assessment of the existing performance improvement measures, processes, and infrastructure components. Based on what we learned, we outlined a set of recommendations to guide investments that will drive the agency towards an ideal future state of performance. We do not intend for these recommendations to be definitive next steps; indeed, some of these recommendations may not be immediately practical given the agency's existing resources. In light of our findings, our recommendations will advance DCYF's progression from its current state of performance to an advanced state, in which the agency is perpetually improving in service of enhanced population well-being across the state.



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