



Child Welfare and Technology:

A Guide for Policymakers.

A briefing on emerging uses of technology for Minnesota's Child Protection, Foster Care and Adoption service systems. This briefing is the second in a series of 2011 policy briefs and builds upon the Center for the Advanced Studies in Child Welfare's 2011 annual publication *CW360°: Child Welfare and Technology*.

Center for Advanced Studies
in **Child Welfare**

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

What is the Field of Child Welfare?

The child welfare field includes human services in the areas of child protection, foster care, and adoption. This work is carried out in a state supervised, county administered system by government as well as non-profit agencies, and is supported by research and evaluation from government, academic institutions and non-profit organizations. The collective goal of child welfare is to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families.

Child Welfare and Technology

This brief highlights the rising cadre of experts advancing the use of technology in the child welfare field. The Center for the Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) issues an annual publication called *CW360°*. The Spring 2011 issue, *Child Welfare and Technology*, is dedicated to exploring how the field of child welfare currently develops, utilizes, and evaluates its interaction with technology. This Policy Brief serves as a “user’s guide” for policy makers and advocates, pointing to the articles most directly linked to policy problems and promising solutions. Citations and page numbers throughout this brief point to the full text of the relevant article in *CW360°*, which can be accessed online at <http://z.umn.edu/cw360>. Footnotes reference external publications.

Technology permeates all areas of Child Welfare services. This influence reaches back to the 1980’s and 1990’s, when policy efforts aimed at government accountability began to emphasize measurable outcomes, which in turn led to “statewide and national computer systems in the United States directed toward...the development of Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS).” (LaMendola, p. 4) Today, advances in technology hold promise not only for program evaluation and data management, but also for rural child welfare workers who want to connect more often with families, for workers searching for kin with whom to place a child in foster care, and for children who wish to keep in touch with extended family living far away. The work of this field is deeply intertwined with public administration, federal data privacy regulations and government accountability standards. As such, innovations in child welfare technology require the approval, and oftentimes intensive engagement, of government policy makers.

Major Data Systems. Major Costs? Major Return on Investment?

Policy Issue: Large data management systems are often incompatible across state agencies.

Policy Solution: Investment in emerging technologies, and doing so in partnership with the private sector, can provide effective and efficient tools to the child welfare system, resulting in improved accountability and service outcomes.

Child Welfare data systems include the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS, known in Minnesota as the Social Service Information System or SSIS), the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), and others like the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). The protection of vulnerable children’s highly-personal information has led to strict data privacy practices. While data protection is critical, it sometimes creates barriers to sharing information across state agencies who serve the same children. Major data systems were often created at various times to meet the specialized needs of state agencies, resulting in incompatibility amongst systems in child welfare, education and health care, for example. Gaps can be bridged by investing in emerging technologies, doing so in partnership with the private sector developers who create the tools that can make critical child welfare services more efficient and effective.

For greater depth, read:

- *Decision Making in Child Protection and Child Welfare: Some Considerations for Information Technology*. By John Fluke, PhD. The creation of helpful information technology and the systems changes needed to do so. Page 8.
- *Administrative Data, Situational Awareness, and Child Maltreatment Decision Making*. By Melissa Jonson-Reid, PhD and Brett Drake, PhD. Visions of success in child welfare technology, and practical considerations for reform. Page 15.
- *State Progress in Sharing Data between Courts and Child Welfare Agencies*. By Victor Eugene Flango, PhD. State policy considerations for data sharing. Page 18.
- *A Court Process Report System (CPRS) for Civil Child Abuse and Neglect Cases*. By Michelle Barclay, Esq., Christopher Church, Esq. and George Li, MS. A successful data sharing program between the court system and child welfare. Page 31.

Why invest in child welfare innovations in a time of historic budget deficits?

- Estimated annual cost of child abuse and neglect in the U.S. = **\$103.8 billion** (in 2007 value¹). These economic costs are substantial, but they do not account for the pain, suffering, and reduced quality of life that victims of child abuse and neglect experience.
- A Virginia county’s innovative technology program to determine a child’s eligibility for state and federal funding costs \$500,000 annually and **saved \$4.63 million** in 2010. County officials calculate **a return on investment of \$8 for every \$1** the county spent on the program.²
- A successful Florida private sector partnership using technology to improve worker efficiency and accountability costs just **\$6 per child, per month** (Allegra & Smith, p. 37).

Accurate Data Recording as a Management and Accountability Tool, Not a Burdensome Process

Policy Issue: In order to strengthen accountability and target program improvements, administrators need child welfare workers to maintain accurate data records. This can be a time-consuming task that pulls workers away from casework.

Policy Solution: Innovations in record-keeping can help workers track case information more accurately and quickly, providing more time to spend with children and families.

Rapid advances in technology are providing the child welfare system with streamlined methods for capturing case information. Innovations range from audio transcription of case notes to electronic tablets that sync with case records, smartphones that photographically document each visit, and cross-system 'medical passports' advising professionals on a child's critical history. As with every experiment, the introduction of new technologies in child welfare practice has encountered some hurdles. Overwhelmingly, though, the response has been positive from supervisors, workers and families alike.

For greater depth, read:

- *Electronic Medical Passports for Improving Outcomes for Children in Foster Care.* By Ron L. Mitchell, MSW and Toni M. Rozanski, MSW. Technology's victory in automated data sharing, increased service and improved outcomes. Page 25.
- *Using Data for Child Welfare System Improvement: Lessons Learned from the California Performance Indicators Project.* By Daniel Webster, PhD, Emily Putnam-Hornstein, PhD, and Barbara Needell, PhD. Integrating data into practice & forging partnerships. Page 6.
- *Mobile Technology in Caseworker Visitation: Utility, Engagement and Professionalism.* By Helen Cahalane, PhD and Rachel Fusco, PhD. A professional perspective on caseworker use of mobile devices and client engagement. Page 11.
- *Mobile Technologies and Child Welfare.* By Sid J. Schneider, PhD and Marneena Evans. States' use & potential applications of mobile technologies to enhance child welfare services. Page 16.
- *Transcription Technology in Child Welfare.* By Jennifer Heldt. Streamlined, efficient tools for recording case notes; advantages and drawbacks to use. Page 29.
- *Measuring Return-On-Investment in Lives: A Model from Florida.* By Frances Allegra, CEO and Pat Smith, CIO. The implementation of technical innovations in a private Florida child welfare agency, resulting in efficiencies, lack of duplications, accountability. Page 32.

Closer Connections through Technology: Children, Families and Workers

Policy Issue: Child welfare workers, impacted by budget reductions in recent years, face high numbers of families on their caseload. Higher caseloads per worker can reduce the number of visits possible, thereby compromising safety, diminishing accuracy and timeliness in data reporting, and leading to less rigorous permanency planning. In rural areas, travel to home visits is especially time-consuming.

Policy Solution: Technology allows people to connect immediately, even across great distances. Increased use of technology can enable the child welfare field to conduct more visits, more effectively search for kin of children in care, and foster permanency in children's relationships.

INCREASED USE OF TECHNOLOGY CAN ENABLE THE CHILD WELFARE FIELD TO CONDUCT MORE VISITS, MORE EFFECTIVELY SEARCH FOR KIN OF CHILDREN IN CARE, AND FOSTER PERMANENCY IN CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIPS.

To a degree, a child welfare worker's interaction with a child is directed by state-level policy. As such, legislators have the opportunity to adjust policy so that child welfare practice can utilize the best technology options available in service to children and families. Legislators could adjust face-to-face visit requirements to account for virtual visitation. Legislators can also encourage the safe use of social media to connect workers, children, and families, and to support kinship and family-of-origin searches.

For greater depth, read:

- *Enhancing the Reach and Outcomes of Child Welfare Programs through Social Media.* By Kathy Ledesma, MSW and Vanessa Casavant, BA. The lessons learned by AdoptUsKids as the organization uses social media to serve youth and families involved in foster care and seeking adoption; successful increase in adoptions. Page 10.
- *Virtual Visitation and Child Welfare.* By Annette Semanchin Jones, MSW. The potential of virtual visitation techniques for rural settings, delivering mental health services, parental visitation and early intervention. Page 19.
- *Finding Family on Facebook.* By Celeste Bodner and Daniel Knapp. The potential for kinship search and protecting foster children from associated social media risks. Page 28.
- *A Challenge to Child Welfare Professionals: Using New Communication Technologies with Young People and their Families.* By Susan Tregagle, PhD. Risks and benefits considerations for adopting information communication technologies. Page 24.

¹Wang, C. - T. Ph.D. & Holton, J. Ph.D. (2007, September). *Total Estimated Cost of Child Abuse and Neglect In the United States.* Prevent Child Abuse America funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Retrieved from http://www.preventchildabuse.org/about_us/media_releases/pcaa_pew_economic_impact_study_final.pdf

²Hosh, Kafia A. (2011, January 9). Va. Tech program helps Fairfax County pay for foster care. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/09/AR2011010904765.html>

Supporting What Works

Policy leaders are charged with the crucial, and often complex, task of investing public resources in the policy solutions that will lead to the best possible outcomes. In order to make wise investments policymakers and, increasingly, the public look to the research community to provide the information needed to make these decisions. The term *Evidence-Based Practice* is often ambiguously used to refer to any policy, program or practice for which research and/or evaluation has been conducted and a favorable outcome has been reported. The formal definition of what constitutes a policy, practice, or program being deemed Evidence-Based is actually much more rigidly defined. CASCW urges policy makers to consider effectiveness ratings for policies, programs and practices on a continuum, and, where true evidence-based solutions are not readily available, to support emerging and promising practices along with the inclusion of rigorous evaluation components in order to help build the evidence base.

The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC), uses a **Scientific Rating Scale** to evaluate child welfare policies, programs, and practices based on the available research evidence along the following continuum:

1. Well-Supported by Research Evidence
 2. Supported by Research Evidence
 3. Promising Research Evidence
 4. Evidence Fails to Demonstrate Effect
 5. Concerning Practice
- NR. Not able to be Rated

Definitions for each rating level can be found on the CEBC website: <http://www.cebc4cw.org/ratings/scientific-rating-scale/>

Resources for further information and continued education

For more general resources on technology and child welfare, take a closer look at *CW360°: Child Welfare and Technology*, available online at: <http://z.umn.edu/cw360>

Follow CASCW on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/CASCW>) or Twitter (@CASCW_MN) for streamlined child welfare updates from Minnesota and the nation. CASCW pulls together relevant child welfare research, policy and practice news daily.

For papers and reports generated by CASCW-supported affiliates, follow this link: <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/CASCW/research/Publications/ResearchPublications.asp>

For more general resources on diverse communities, disparities, and child welfare, follow this link: <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/SSW/cascw/events/CulturalDiversity/default.asp>

To keep current on topics important to the field, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway at: www.childwelfare.gov

Looking for information on the newest child welfare publications or current news and resources from the field? Subscribe to: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/admin/subscribe/>

To access instructions to download *CW360°* to e-readers/ipads, see <http://z.umn.edu/ereader>



More Policy Briefs Coming Soon

CASCW will continue to publish policy briefs to share research and evidence-based policy solutions on pressing issues for Minnesota's children and families. Look for new policy briefs coming soon.

Not finding what you need? Contact CASCW directly for information, research & analysis on Child Welfare at 612-625-8121 or cascw@umn.edu.

The Center for the Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is a nonpartisan research and training center at the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work. CASCW's mission is to improve the well-being of children and families who are involved in the child welfare system by; educating human service professionals, fostering collaboration across systems and disciplines, informing policy makers and the public, and expanding the child welfare knowledge base. CASCW takes neither partisan positions nor advocates for or against specific bills. Instead, CASCW offers background data, theory, and evidence-based practices that may be helpful to you as you consider these issues. www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw