



Private child and family serving agencies: Implications of national survey results for policy and managerial practice



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ABSTRACT

The national studies represented in this symposium provide the field with greater understanding of the nature of the private sector's role in child welfare and the complex interrelationships among organizational characteristics, inter-organizational dynamics, and external influences. Research findings from symposium papers are examined through the lens of a private agency manager and implications are derived for managerial practice and policy practice both within the private agency and in relation to public/private child welfare partnerships. Key managerial competencies that may be required to move agencies and the sector towards enhanced organizational performance and child welfare outcomes are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The role of the private sector in child welfare service provision

Child welfare in America today is a joint endeavor of the public and private sectors. While the roots of this field were established in private agencies (Rosenthal, 2000; Zullo, 2002), the federally mandated role of public child welfare agencies in the 1970s grew as legislatures directed public resources to public agencies to deliver, coordinate, and monitor local services to communities (Embry, Buddenhagen, & Bolles, 2000). However, private agencies continue to play a significant role in the provision of concrete services to the child welfare population (Collins-Camargo, Ensign, & Flaherty, 2008), typically through a contractual relationship with the state or local public agency.

Over time, the human service sector has experienced a significant devolution of public services to private organizations due to an ideological preference for a smaller government, a belief that private sector service delivery promotes efficiency and innovation through inter-organizational competition, and a search for effective solutions to child welfare challenges. This shift from public to private provision of human services brings challenges relating to dispersed authority and the development and maintenance of cross-sector governance systems involving public and private agency coordination (Graddy & Bostic, 2010). For these governance systems to operate effectively, public agencies must develop accountability structures and incentives to promote service quality, efficiency, equity, and effectiveness (Heinrich, Lynn, & Milward, 2010); and service providers must use management

techniques such as performance measurement to ensure effective service delivery (Alexander, Brudney, & Yang, 2010).

The preceding papers in this symposium touch on these policy and practice developments through their analysis of recent national datasets. The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) Local Area Directors Interview provides two time points (1999 and 2009) with which to examine the structure and function of local public child welfare agencies, and the National Survey of Private Child and Family Serving Agencies (NSPCFSA) represents an exploratory portrait of the private nonprofit and for-profit organizations serving the child welfare population and the perceptions of managers regarding inter-organizational relationships and factors influencing service provision (McBeath, Collins-Camargo, & Chuang, 2012). After a brief review of the characteristics and challenges related to the dual sector nature of child welfare, this paper summarizes and discusses the primary results from each symposium paper. The goal of the current paper is to explore managerial practice and policy implications of results from each symposium paper as the system moves forward in an era of resource limitations and accountability demands. We derive these implications from the research literature as well as our professional experiences as leaders, managers, program developers, and researchers with over 50 combined years of experience in private child welfare agencies.

1.2. Policy–practice challenges associated with the dual sector nature of child welfare service delivery

As with all publicly mandated services, the public agency and its private contractors are accountable for the proper expenditure of public dollars, the delivery of appropriate and effective services in alignment with legal and policy requirements, and for ensuring the safety,

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permanency, and well-being of children and their families (Gronbjerg, 2010; Smith, 2012). These public expectations would be considerable even if child welfare agencies did not serve the most vulnerable of populations in often resource-starved communities. Public and private child welfare agencies therefore operate in an environment shaped by legal and policy requirements, service coordination challenges, and very real frontline consequences for children and families. Even when child welfare services are partly or wholly contracted out to the private sector, these accountability expectations and pressures remain on the public child welfare system and its administrators.

Yet accountability structures such as the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) and their state-level equivalents primarily focus on the performance of public rather than private agencies. Albeit imperfect, these scorecard-based processes represent a step forward from former audit-based monitoring processes to a more outcomes-driven approach to child welfare system improvement. In particular, the CFSR presents an opportunity to link policies, programs, and outcomes by evaluating progress towards established benchmarks in light of new policy and program initiatives (Courtney, Needell, & Wulczyn, 2004).

However, it is unclear how successful the CFSR can be unless the contributions of the private sector are publicly acknowledged, evaluated, and supported. Particularly when services are largely or wholly contracted out to the private sector, policymakers need to understand which agencies are actually providing mandated services and implementing public policies. If decision-makers focus on only the public agency when significant portions of the service array are provided by the private sector, there is an unfortunate disconnect. In addition, the private sector by its very nature has the power to influence policy through their boards and grounding in the community, so an inclusive approach that appreciates and assesses the role of both sectors is important. In addition, a lack of public understanding of the cross-sector responsibility for service provision hinders proactive and coordinated responses when class action lawsuits and tragedies such as child fatalities are covered in the media and there is a resultant call for reform (Collins et al., 2012).

When services are contracted to the private sector, striking a balance of appropriate contract monitoring and quality assurance while promoting innovation and continuous quality improvement is critical. Public managers in these privatized service delivery settings need to engage in contract monitoring and spur private agencies towards quality improvement, but the manner in which they ensure accountability need not be draconian. Public agency managers can provide discretionary space to enable private agencies to achieve efficiency and outcomes, although this may be difficult when operating within a regulatory environment set up to promote conformity with policy and legal dicta at the expense of local adaptation (Hood, 2000). Similar challenges exist for the private agency manager trying to balance a business model while meeting expectations of governmental entities.

Public agency managers therefore need skills in collaborative contract negotiation and monitoring (Austin, 2003). The details of the contract itself cannot ensure equitable contracting processes and outcome achievement; nor can it be assumed that contract preconditions are fully specified to anticipate all challenges that may arise as private agencies seek to serve client populations. Attention must be paid to the social, economic, cultural, and political environments, and the larger policy context, in which contracts are structured and program goals (and thus contracts) are developed (Mirafab, 2004). Private agency managers too must be skilled in negotiating contract provisions based on agency capacity and anticipated constraints. These dynamics may lead public and private agency managers to develop strong interorganizational ties over the course of service delivery and contract monitoring (Collins-Camargo, McBeath, & Ensign, 2011; Van Slyke, 2007).

1.3. A vision of partnership within the context of a contractual relationship

In child welfare there is much discussion of implementing a comprehensive system of care to serve families effectively and to achieve child

and family well-being (Mitchell et al., 2012). This model requires collaboration within the child welfare system (e.g., between public and private agencies) and across adjacent human service systems including education and physical and behavioral health. Developing such a continuum of care may require public child welfare agencies to move from an auditor model to a partner model focused on collaborative system improvement (Austin, 2003). Schaeffer and Loveridge (2002) describe a continuum of public/private partnership models ranging from leader–follower to exchange to joint venture to true partnership. The operationalization of such a partnership and continuum of care despite the inherent power imbalances and public control over private service delivery is very complex (Smith, 2012; Van Slyke, 2007).

What skills must child welfare agency managers possess to navigate interorganizational relationships and actualize program goals? In child welfare there is a growing body of literature exploring managerial practice in relation to initiating, monitoring, and evaluating contracts (e.g., Mosley & Ros, 2011; Wells, 2006). The Network for Social Work Management has established Human Services Management Competencies (Hassan, Waldman, & Wimpfheimer, n.d.) across the domains of leadership, resource management, strategic management, and community collaboration; and Collins-Camargo et al. (2011) review the relevance of these management practice domains for enhancing public–private partnerships in child welfare. We use these four practice domains to anchor our private agency management perspective and to draw practice and policy implications from symposium papers.

2. Implications of symposium papers for policy and management practice

2.1. The organizational and managerial context of private child welfare agencies: an institutional political economic approach to child welfare practice

McBeath, Collins-Camargo, Chuang, Wells, Bunger and Pérez Jolles (2014—in this issue) provide a framework for examining the institutional and organizational factors shaping private agency service provision. Based on a review of the scholarly literature, an institutional political economic approach is developed which takes into account the complex interactions between institutional and market pressures; regulatory, inter-organizational and community factors; organizational, staff and client characteristics and behavior; and the interrelationships between these macro- and meso-level factors that can be expected to influence service delivery and outcome achievement.

This complex, multi-layered context drives frontline child welfare work even though the evidence base supporting the role of child welfare agency managers in this context remains underdeveloped (Barth, 2008). Child welfare managers must set a policy expectation for building the evidence base within their sphere of agency influence and for basing their operational strategies on sound evidence from their agency and external research (Briggs & McBeath, 2009). Requisite management competencies in this arena span the practice domains of leadership, resource management, strategic management, and community collaboration. These competencies are required of managers in both sectors to (a) assist private agencies in responding to the institutional, market, and community factors within the constraints of the regulatory environment and (b) leverage performance-promoting structures designed to move organizational and staff behaviors in concert with client groups toward outcome achievement. Whether the cross-sector service relationship is viewed as a formally organized contract directed by the public agency, or more of a collaborative process involving shared learning and adaptation, is likely to shift based on the leadership skills of public and private managers and the external pressures experienced by the system.

McBeath, Collins-Camargo, Chuang, Wells, Bunger and Pérez Jolles (2014—in this issue) then propose a research agenda for expanding the evidence base related to the institutional and organizational contexts

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