

Visioning for Prevention: An Upstream Approach Advice Reel Podcast

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NARRATOR: The Indiana Department of Child Services made a dramatic shift to reduce the number of children being separated from their families, and they did it by taking an upstream approach to prevention services. In 2017, the number of children in foster care was increasing due, in part, to the opiate crisis. An outside assessment of their system, a change in leadership, and the Family First Prevention Services Act came together at just the right time for DCS to expand prevention services into every county across the state. DCS leaders leaned into the research and data and have cultivated strong relationships with system partners and providers to create a child and family well-being system. Listen to a few of the partners talk about what is making this shift towards prevention possible.

HANNAH ROBINSON: Hello, I'm Hannah Robinson, the prevention services manager at the Indiana Department of Child Services.

Our two largest prevention programs are the Community Partners for Child Safety program and the Healthy Families Indiana program. Both of them are available in every county in the state.

I never realized how much time I would spend advocating for funding or money.

I'm using data to help support the need for an increase in funding for one of our programs. I try to do my best to explain why it's necessary, because I feel like, at times, it's difficult for leadership to understand how investment in prevention does make a lot of sense financially. You know, it really reduces the economic burden that we experience associated with child maltreatment, serving children and families that have experienced abuse and neglect.

It's doing what's best for kids and families, right, in helping them access the supports that meet their needs, so that intervention with the child welfare system isn't necessary.

We look to see if the families that have participated in either of the programs subsequently become involved with the child welfare system in a formal way, and 99% of families that participate in both of our programs don't.

I probably throw that information out there way too much, but it just shows that, that what we're doing is working, and we should continue to invest in programs that are working.

Well, I would say, it's just important to make sure that you bring all the right people to the table. In Indiana, we've been really lucky that we have a lot of longstanding partnerships with our community stakeholders.

We often include other state agency representatives, various provider partners, philanthropic groups, and families, in any of our project planning.

We also think that it's beneficial to create a shared vision, mission, and approach with the folks that we're working with and outlining what their contribution will be and what kind of commitment is expected from them to participate in whatever we're working on.

We really rely on our provider partners to identify who else should be involved in the conversation.

That's constantly evolving.

Who else do we need to bring to the table? What adjustments do we need to make?

There absolutely was a shift in how we serve families on the intervention side with the focus on keeping kids safe in their homes whenever possible, but within that kind of changing the structure of how we pay providers for their work with families and really focusing on one provider providing any services or supports that that family needs instead of connecting a family to various agencies and programs to kind of meet all of their needs.

That was a huge shift for really everyone, for our DCS field staff and how they connect families to programming and how that has really changed who is responsible for identifying what the family needs. It really shifted that more to the provider, in assessing and identifying and recommending evidence-based programs to, to support the needs of the family.

It's definitely has to be easier for the families to really engage with the provider when they're not going or having multiple people from different places working with them.

DEE SZYNDROWSKI: I'm Dee Szyndrowski, CEO of SCAN, Stop Child Abuse and Neglect, Inc. out of Fort Wayne, Indiana, and currently we provide the continuum of services of both prevention and intervention for children and families in 34 counties.

I think our partners at DCS shared a vision, and it just happened to be the vision that I have had for child abuse and neglect for a while, right? I mean, I wake up every day to close my doors because intervention is not needed and abuse and neglect doesn't happen. And the only way that I can do that is to create safe avenues in our community for families to go to and resources and have everyone talking about the fact that this is preventable.

I think it's just being willing to engage in that conversation and having an open mind and listening, because what I might think from a practitioner's perspective on how to prevent child abuse, neglect, or even how to intervene in it, might be different from somebody else's perspective.

It's okay to really think about stepping out of your traditional collaborations. Typical collaborative entities are usually other providers that provide the same service, my funding sources. But what has been really exciting is pulling into, I would say, the manufacturing sector or, pulling into city government, and really working with our legislatures on different things as it really relates to children and families, educational systems. And so I think it's really important to sit back and say, as a community, we're defining the future of our community and our children.

I think by nature, we're a very immediate gratification society, and the work that we're doing is not immediate gratification. When you think about changing systems and really prevention work it's collaborative, it's tough. It's three steps forward, four steps back. It's making sure you have the right partner. And so being okay with finding different ways to fill your bucket and having patience and measuring your success in maybe smaller doses instead of, "Hey, this is the end goal." Because, you know, and I can only relate it back to family systems because that's just rooted in where I am, systems don't change overnight.

We model and mirror the work that our families go through.

Being willing to work through all of those things, I think, is probably the best advice that I could give. Being willing to come to the table and just openly talk about what you're experiencing and how we can then move forward.

I'm not saying all the conversations are easy because change is never easy. It's a collaboration. People have to bend. People have to move in different directions. You have to be willing to step outside of the box, admit that you may not have the right answer, and be willing to try something different. All of which we're asking our families and children to do when we're intervening with them. We cannot ask them to do something we're not willing to do ourselves.

DAVID REED:

I'm David Reed, the deputy director of child welfare services for the Indiana Department of Child Services. I have been at DCS now since September of 2017. I've been a social worker my entire adult life.

It's kind of ironic that we are in this conversation about prevention because when I first came to the department almost four years ago, I'm confident Indiana would not have been a state that would have been looked at as a state talking about prevention work, because we were one of the worst states in the country when it comes to your rates of removal and kids coming into foster care.

We could not remove our way to child safety, and, in trying to do so, we were really creating a lot of damage to child well-being.

Learning patience was a difficult thing for me, but I was persistent.

That patience part was really difficult. And I kind of wanted to rush in like a bull in a China shop sometimes. And I had to get pulled back and reminded to be collaborative. You know, we can't do this on our own. DCS, certainly David Reed can't on his own. We need providers. We need CASAs. We need judges. We need other stakeholders, and we'll take help where we can get it to really get where we want to go as an agency. We've completely shifted how we reimbursed for services as a state, especially for our prevention of removal cases.

We are trying to listen to people who have been involved in our work: families, kids, older youth and providers, too.

We're really trying hard to engage and support families differently now and tons of communication. That's one thing I would definitely stress to anyone trying to make system changes is you've got to have lots of consistent communication.

Every two weeks we have a conversation with all 95 of those providers that have that contract. And we talk about cases. We talk about expectations. We talk about numbers and data. We spend a lot of time talking about why the data matters.

We're able to demonstrate that this is a better way to keep families together and do it safely. Not only are more families together and fewer kids are in foster care, we haven't had an increase in fatalities.

If we can recognize: Keeping families together in the first place will create healthier adults when, when today's kids become tomorrow's parents.

NARRATOR:

What did you hear that can help you in your work? Advice like Hannah's use of data to advocate for prevention programs, Dee's reminder that we model and mirror the work that families go through, and David's advice to have lots of consistent communication, can help to build a collective vision for prevention. To hear more about how Indiana's child welfare agency, partner organizations, and families work together to become more prevention-oriented, watch the recorded webinar, "Visioning for Prevention: An Upstream Approach," available on our website at capacity.childwelfare.gov/states.

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