

If Odysseus Were a Child Welfare Department Director

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In FFY 2018, child welfare agencies received an estimated 4.3 million referrals alleging abuse and neglect, representing approximately 7.8 million children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020, ix). While unfortunate that such agencies even need to exist, the statistics compellingly stress the importance of having a courageous leader and expert to fill the child welfare director job. The duties vary depending on the organization. Typically, child welfare directors plan, organize, manage, evaluate, and direct the agency's staff. They ensure policies and procedures meet legal requirements and provide direction on budgetary, contractual, personnel, and organizational development matters. One of the most critical duties is maintaining close relations with the community to assess program needs and service delivery effectiveness. It is not a job that many people want. Indeed, in 2007, Congress was told that the average tenure of a child welfare director in the United States was between 18 months and two years (Rawlings, 2019).

Some child welfare systems are county-administered and others state-run. Either way, politics play a significant role in the life of a child welfare director. When a new child welfare director comes on board, a period of cordiality and enthusiasm generally prevails. This honeymoon period can pass quickly, and, to some extent, that is best. Most child welfare directors

report to a high-level executive from whom they get their "marching orders." From day one, child welfare directors need to find out what internal and external stakeholders' agendas are and begin synthesizing information gathered. The new director needs to

- Learn what skills the management team and line staff have.
- Figure out what is working well and what needs immediate attention.
- Rapidly put a plan of action in place and begin to execute it. There is always great urgency in child welfare; children do not have the luxury of time, and every minute counts.

Many of us recall learning about the Greek mythological hero Odysseus sailing home from the Trojan War. His challenge was having to navigate through the Strait of Messina. On one side was the six-headed monster Scylla; on the other side was Charybdis, a whirlpool that sucked in ships that sailed too near her. Today's child welfare director faces a similar situation. Many child welfare systems are hobbled because they were never meant to serve as many children as they do. Also, there simply are not enough resources (Chibnall et al., 2003). In some instances, the media fuels negative attitudes toward the child welfare system, especially when there is a child fatality. Workers suffer from burnout, often resulting in high turnover. On top of these challenges, some perennially malcontented employees, and some internal or external partners, many of whom have no

expertise in child welfare or have ever worked in child welfare, are pushing their own agendas. Politics in child welfare have led to swift reactive actions to “fix” a myriad of problems. The child welfare director is continuously dealing with this between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place situation.

Working With Employees

Ask newly minted college graduates with a social work, psychology, counseling, or sociology degree what kind of a job they would like. Whatever their answer, it would not include being part of a large bureaucratic organization, feeling hindered by laws, policies, and procedures. Child welfare workers are first responders but receive little recognition or benefits for putting their lives on the line. Another reality that affects workers is that directors and managers have a responsibility to ensure that their agency meets various federal, state, and local mandates. This can interfere with spending time with the families and children on their caseload in front-line workers’ eyes. There are also large workloads, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue, which lead child welfare workers to experience burnout at elevated rates—estimated at 20%–40%—compared with the general population (Casey Family Programs, 2017).

The director needs to invest a lot of his or her time with the agency’s staff. Simultaneously, the director needs to communicate a clear vision and develop a safe learning organization where coaching and mentoring allow workers to become their best. Never to be underestimated is the principle that the director needs to carefully balance advocating for the department staff while not compromising the children’s interests and families the department is serving.

Dealing With Politics

In many workplaces, specific topics of conversation are strictly off-limits. Among the most prominent are religion and politics. Politics are not off-limits in a department of child welfare – certainly not in the director’s office. But politics are a frequent guest that can derail efforts to address an already complex and crippled system. Long before the past two presidential elections and their intense ideological differences,

child welfare directors knew they had to be adept at dealing with their job’s political aspects. Lessons to master include the following:

- Paying as much attention to the personality of a speaker as to the content of their speech.
- Forthrightly educating and sharing information and ideas while being aware that—yes—the walls have ears.
- Being genuinely open to all points of view and being willing to try new approaches.
- Always communicating the “why” behind major decisions.
- Knowing that not every question requires an immediate answer. It is all right to make some decisions swiftly while legitimately putting others on the back burner.
- Always being aware of the chief executive’s (county executive, mayor, governor) interests and positions.
- Regularly revisiting goals and marching orders with the boss. Course corrections should be done jointly and should be documented.
- Maintaining integrity. Siding with children and families to keep them safe, well, and thriving is always the right thing to do.

Conclusion

Child abuse and neglect are serious national public health problems. Unsurprisingly, the child welfare system dealing with these problems is often reactive rather than proactive. Changes to fix the system, including hiring a new child welfare director, are frequently incident-driven and are apt to set back advances. Most people who work in child welfare departments are selfless, kind, empathetic, patient, and persevering team players. Unfortunately, a few can make the life of a child welfare director quite challenging from a legal and liability perspective. The stakes are extremely high, and dilettante interference is unhelpful.

Child welfare directors need to actively work on preventing child maltreatment and ensuring that system-involved families and children receive timely quality services when needed. There is a lot to balance. Today, with school buildings shuttered, some homes have become a petri dish for child maltreatment. Child

welfare experts, community representatives, and those that are directly affected by child protection agencies need to drive improvements to our child welfare systems.

Homer's *Odyssey* describes Odysseus's ten-year return journey back to his home on the island of Ithaca. Looking forward over the next ten years, professional child welfare directors face a similar daunting task. The rest of us need to be available to support, assist and embrace the changes needed to improve the child welfare system.

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