

Texas Child Protection Services (CPS)

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Abstract

The Texas Child Protection Services agency is one of the agencies under the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) that has transformed the lives of many by helping families and minors under imminent danger. Over the years, the agency has undertaken numerous steps coupled with legislation, with the aim of improving child safety across the state. Unfortunately, like most public nonprofit organizations, the agency has not been able to achieve a number of its goals over the years. Whereas some of the goals have not been realized due to factors beyond the organization's scope, it is also true that the agency bears responsibility for some of the missed goals and objectives. Therefore, in this paper, I examine the organization starting with its purpose, structure, and operation with the aim of identifying areas and sectors that need improvement. I then discuss in detail the steps the agency can take to address the shortcomings. I hope that by following these recommendations, the Texas child protection services will immensely improve its service delivery and perhaps solved the issue of child abuse altogether.

Keywords: Abuse, neglect, exploitation, safety, divisions

Texas Child Protection Services (CPS)

The CPS is an agency within the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). The CPS aims to safeguard minors from exploitation and neglect by collaborating with families to guarantee the minors permanency, safety and improve their well-being. The need for these services was reaffirmed following recent statistics that showed that about 66,398 minors were abused or neglected and about 156 minors died as a result of abuse in 2013 alone.

To enhance service delivery, the CPS has been divided into various divisions. The divisions are also synonymous with the stages through which a case is reported to the time a case is concluded by the CPS. In this regard, the first division within the agency is the Statewide Intake (SWI) which is functional 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. The SWI acts as the gateway for recording and processing all cases of maltreatment, exploitation, and neglect. The division is tasked to perform a number of functions. First is to analyze the information presented by utilizing state laws and DFPS' general guidelines. Secondly, the division officials enter the data into the automated computer system. Third, they process the information and send it to CPS local office. Lastly, the division serves as a referral center if the case reported is not under the purview of DFPS (Wilson et al., 2014).

The second stage or division is Investigation (INV). As the name indicates, this involves investigations into whether a minor has been exploited or neglected. Investigative officials also try to find if there are any imminent or long-term dangers to the well-being of the minor in the present living condition. Where it appears that the child's safety is under imminent harm the process of removal starts immediately. However, if the danger is not immediate investigations will continue, and some cases may even be closed at this stage if no risk is apparent or the risk factors can be controlled. In cases where risk is evident the families are referred for services.

Consequently, the next stage or division is the Family-Based Safety Services (FBSS). The FBSS aims to assist families in enhancing the well-being of their children by offering them services to help them capitalize on the existing strengths and resources. Under this service, the child may be separated from his immediate family and placed under the care of a relative or a family friend where such action will ensure the child's safety. Additionally, families may receive one of the three FBSS services based on the degree to which a child may be exploited or neglected in future. The three services include regular FBSS, moderate FBSS, and intensive FBSS and all these services apply when the minor is still within the family (Wilson et al., 2014).

Alternatively, as was earlier indicated, a child can be placed under Substitute Care (SUB), which is yet another stage/division under the CPS. Whereas this is the least desirable option, sometimes it is essential to separate a minor from his/her family and put him/her under the guidance of the state if remaining with the family is deemed unsafe. Such a decision can be reached at any stage or division. Minors under SUB can be sent to DFPS foster homes, emergency shelters, foster homes, basic child care, adoptive homes and other homes where they will remain until the case is closed. The final stage or division is Family Reunification (FRE) whereby the minors under SUB get to be reunited with their families once the CPS workers or the court is satisfied that the family has made the appropriate changes to guarantee the safety of the minor.

Although the structure analyzed above appears simple, the entire CPS system is sophisticated. Consequently, the complexity has led to a number of structural and managerial challenges in some of the divisions, which means strategic changes need to be made to address the challenges. Undoubtedly, the SUB is one of the divisions that require strategic changes following recent media reports that highlighted the lack of enough foster homes across the state

leading to some minors spending nights in hospitals, state offices, and psychiatric institutions. What is more, the progression journey through SUB for most children involves many challenges. In this respect, children may have many traumatic experiences as they rotate from home to home. Foster care homes and other alternative care homes in many cases are unable to cater for the unique needs of abused children sufficiently, and as a result, many children undergo multiple placements prior to attaining permanency. Despite the numerous laws and reforms that have been enacted to enhance service delivery, the SUB division challenges are yet to be resolved (Frank, 2016).

Also, the CPS needs to adjust its strategic approach with regard to its human resource. Due to the bureaucratic nature of the system coupled with heavy paperwork, the agency has not been able to attract highly talented staff to work in the various divisions. It is obvious that to offer better services and achieve its mission the Texas CPS needs to attract talented employees. The agency's leadership also needs to review the current mission and its leadership approach. It could be true that some of the challenges facing the organization are emanating from poor leadership strategies and lack of clarity regarding the organization's mission. CPS just like most nonprofit organization today has a mission that is too broad. For instance, the CPS' core mission should be to prevent minors from being exploited and neglected in the first place rather than offering temporary refuge for families and children facing challenges. Moreover, going by past studies, very few employees in nonprofit organizations know and comprehend the missions of their agencies. Even the few who know it lack any level of passion or obligation towards it, and this could be true for CPS. Equally, when an organization's mission is too broad as is the case with the CPS, organizations find themselves stretching their programs beyond their capacity and organizational scope (Jonker & Meehan, 2014). These challenges can be resolved by redefining

the organization's mission and employing better leadership strategies. Additionally, all the divisions are currently struggling to execute their mandate due to limited resources and funding. The continued growth of the number of children requiring CPS services means that resources are continually being overstretched. Whereas more funding is needed, it would also be prudent to restructure the organization's budgeting and fiscal management approach. This will ensure that there is no wastage of the limited funds and that the high priority areas get more resource allocation than the low priority areas.

To counter the aforementioned challenges, and enhance the quality of child protection services, the agency needs to adopt a number of strategies. First, the agency should be more flexible in its human resource recruitment coupled with enhanced accountability of the workforce. Flexibility, on the one hand, entails the willingness to offer competitive salaries and comprehensive training to lure highly talented individuals to join the agency. To attain this, it would be prudent also to allow the organization to recruit experts from complementary fields such as caregivers and first responders who are competent to handle the traumatic encounters that CPS employees go through daily (Frank, 2016). On the other hand, accountability involves holding the employees accountable for their actions through their supervisors or managers. The process of accountability must be backed by strong accountability measures. This starts by setting specific goals or objectives for each staff member. Each employee's performance will then be compared to their expected outcome. As such, CPS will easily determine the impact of missing the targeted goals and the mitigation steps to take to address the challenges.

It is, however, crucial to first inform the workers how achieving their targets will be advantageous to both the organization and them personally. This is because as earlier mentioned, employees may not be willing to do what is expected of them just because they know it.

Knowing the benefits of their goals will make them accept the goals and work towards achieving them. Once this is done, periodic measurement of employee progress will be necessary to help promote accountability. For instance, the managers should check whether employees in the investigation division are responding rapidly to reported cases of child abuse as expected. The managers should then provide feedback to the employees and help them identify ways to improve their performance.

However, for this strategy to work effectively, the goals and objectives must be attached to the agency's overall mission and vision. As rightly argued by Jonker & Meehan (2014), a good mission that depicts an organization's primary mission is the beginning point of avoiding the temptation to expand beyond the organization's scope commonly referred to as mission creep. A good mission statement should be straightforward, be able to inspire, solve unmet needs, utilize unique skills, stick in the memory and should be inspired by major stakeholders. If CPS would have a mission statement with such characteristic, it will lay the foundation for change. Further, Jonker & Meehan (2014) advise that to avoid mission creep, nonprofit organizations like CPS must learn to say no to funders who want to support them on condition that they broaden their mission statement. However, CPS must be willing to say yes to opportunities and challenges that will grow their mission. The challenge may be something outside CPS' scope but that which aligns with their mission. Tackling such challenges can immensely increase CPS' capacity to offer better services to the children. What is more, in special cases CPS should consider creating more divisions such as abuse prevention division to avoid overwhelming the current divisions with responsibilities and at the same time avoid mission creep.

With regard to the challenges facing the SUB division, the agency should enhance its enrollment and retention of foster and other alternative homes. As such, more children will find places they can call home and minimize cases of minors spending nights in offices and other undesignated places. The CPS laws should also be revised to make it easier for potential foster parents to adopt children. The current laws have created a long process which is time-consuming and associated with a lot of paperwork. The cumbersome nature of this process discourages potential foster parents from applying for the custody of the children. Therefore, the system should be changed and backed by laws that do not create barriers but rather encourage qualified individuals and families to become foster parents (Frank, 2016).

The agency should also embrace Cross-sector Collaboration (CSC), which is the coming together of various actors and institutions, each with special knowledge, experiences, and industry prowess to find solutions to public problems such as child abuse. For instance, the budget crunch that CPS is facing can be solved by collaborating with other public nonprofit or private organizations to pull financial resources together to pursue common goals. The good news is that there are many CSC approaches that the agency's leadership can employ to tackle its problems. The first approach is collaborative contracting whereby the involved parties may enter into an 'incomplete' agreement because the period of engagement is long, hence the contract is subject to adjustments. The second and perhaps the most common CSC is the Public-private Partnerships (PPPs). PPPs involve alliances between nonprofits and private companies to achieve short-term to long-term goals. The other two types of CSC include network governance and independent public-services providers (Forrer, Edwin & Boyer, 2017). Becker & Smith (2018) are of the view that for CSC to work, organizations such as the Texas children protection services must promote a workplace environment that develops cross-sector leaders. One sure

way of achieving this is to rotate managers across different divisions as they progress in their careers. For instance, a person who serves as a manager in the investigations division should be transferred to the SUB division and later to the statewide intake division. With the experience gained from serving in the various divisions coupled with key leadership competencies such a person will help the organization implement CSC.

Ultimately, the need for CPS is undisputed considering that the cases of children being abused, exploited and neglected continue to rise. Unfortunately, the CPS in its current state cannot guarantee all the children in Texas safety due to limited funding and other structural limitations. I hope that the agency will be guided by the above recommendations to redesign its approach towards children safety. As the adage goes “prevention is better than cure,” the primary mission should be to prevent abuse from occurring rather than trying to mitigate the damage. There is no doubt that preventing cases of child abuse from happening will save the country billions of dollars that are spent annually on the affected children’s medication and well-being. Moreover, children who have been abused are susceptible to psychological conditions such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress, depression and much more.

Going forward, I hope that the CPS will embrace CSC to help it address its financial constraints. Private companies working in healthcare, for instance, may be readily willing to work with CPS to address some of the technical and financial problems that the agency faces. The agency should also work closely with various stakeholders such as parents and the legislator to find lasting solutions to the endemic problem of child abuse. Ideally, the CPS should be a one-stop shop for all child protection services, where affected minors will feel secure and loved despite the traumatic experiences some of them encounter.

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