

# Child Welfare: Taking a Tech Lesson From the Aviation Industry

*Government and business must unite to develop interoperable systems and standards for children's safety, just as they did for air passenger safety. Advocacy to secure political leadership and public will is key.*

*By Eileen Mayers Pasztor, DSW*

**F**OR DECADES, STUDIES AND NEWS REPORTS HAVE documented child welfare system failures and offered legislative, policy, program and practice fixes. From the discovery of “foster care drift” in the 1950s to the conceptual framework of permanency in the late 1970s, to the 1989 congressional report on discarded children, numerous task forces, commissions and foundations have demanded improved services for at-risk children and families.

Over 15 years ago, the National Black Child Development Institute made significant recommendations addressing the disgrace of disproportionality. In 1991, the National Commission on Family Foster Care issued a “blueprint” of strategies to strengthen the workforce of caseworkers, foster parents and kinship caregivers. Meanwhile, local and state child welfare agencies keep reorganizing and convening more stakeholders groups. No wonder one study labeled the child welfare system as “running to keep in place.”

Now attention is on harnessing computer technology, state and national data networks and data analysis to achieve federally legislated mandates of child safety, well-being and permanency. Why haven't the billions of dollars spent on child welfare technologies over the past decade translated into demonstrable improvements nationwide? Why are there continued reports of a system in “crisis?”

Lessons apply from another industry with client safety and well-being as its paramount mission: our nation's commercial aviation system. It integrates government mandates with private-sector solutions, and has made significant safety gains in the past few decades. Airlines, aircraft manufacturers, air-traffic controllers and federal regulators have used workforce standards and technology to dramatically improve the safety of their clients—the flying public. Some would say there are few parallels. But both systems involve public and private sectors, unions, liabilities and lawsuits stemming from death and injury. And both have huge client and employee numbers, myriad regulations, and are at the mercy of shifts in social and economic factors typically beyond their control.

About 15,000 federal employees work as air-traffic controllers. They are responsible for tracking every airplane—from jumbo jets to puddle-jumpers—whether those planes are taxiing from an airport gate or flying at 500 miles per hour at 34,000 feet. They must communicate with pilots who are employees from the for-profit sector. They serve 600 million clients annually, and there hasn't been a fatal crash of a large jet in the United States in seven years.

## **Safety First and Foremost**

An estimated 280,000 social workers serve the child welfare system. Nationally, there are about 2.6 million reported cases of child abuse and neglect each year, and almost 900,000 of those cases are substantiated. Roughly 1,400 children die annually in the United States from abuse and neglect. This is the equivalent of almost four jumbo jets crashing every year. Would any of us fly with that kind of safety record? Here are a few examples of what we can learn from the aviation industry, whose workforce is sufficiently competent to achieve such a phenomenal safety record, and how technology helps achieve its outcomes.

Criteria for workforce quality are mandated at the federal level. Government air-traffic controllers and private-sector airline pilots are required to have specific competencies, along with commensurate training and periodic retraining. Regardless of the airline or the location of the air-traffic control facility, federal rules require shared competencies and uniform training. In the United States, 23 colleges are authorized to train controllers as undergraduates, and there are specific requirements before controllers can be hired. Like other professionals with life-impacting responsibilities, such as the various medical personnel who work side by side in operating rooms, controllers and pilots do not train together. But each professional is trained and held accountable for the common goal of safety, with clearly defined reciprocal roles, the same working language and mutually understood protocols.

In stark contrast, the child welfare system relies on a web of federal and state laws and regulations with widely divergent standards for hiring and training. Even within one agency, there can be considerable diversity in educational backgrounds and training. While national recommendations propose that child welfare administrators and supervisors have Master of Social Work degrees and direct service workers have at least Bachelor of Social Work degrees, fewer than 15 percent of child welfare agencies require such credentials. Even staff with the same academic degree can come from more than 450 BSW and 181 MSW programs nationwide. What's more, turnover is so high that the average tenure of child welfare workers is less than two years, according to national studies, and many supervisors have only three years of experience.

Further, almost all child welfare workforce studies overlook another critical component of the service delivery system: foster parents and kinship caregivers who have 'round-the-clock responsibility to protect and nurture at-risk children and youth. Although these caregivers must work reciprocally with caseworkers, they are not uniformly trained to do so. Most jurisdictions do not mandate competency-based training for relatives. In-service training for foster parents varies from four to 20 hours annually, and attending a conference, watching a video or reading materials borrowed from the agencies' approved lending libraries often suffice. As a result, there is no guarantee that any two caseworkers or caregivers will follow the same protocols, or that personal value systems won't impact decisions.

### **Cutting-Edge Risk Control**

When it comes to risk management, the aviation system uses advances in interoperability that could serve the child welfare system well. The central principle of identifying incipient or developing safety threats and problems is a good example. Relying on computer programs to highlight instances where the system doesn't work as intended, actions are taken to prevent injuries and fatalities. Radar data reveal when pilots fly at the wrong altitude or controllers instruct aircraft to cross the wrong runway, for instance, and after each serious incident, supervisors and employees (both pilots and air-traffic controllers) are required to analyze the misstep. Then, government and corporate experts work together to identify preventive measures and distribute them accordingly.

Cutting-edge safety initiatives by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) rely on gathering and melding data from a wide range of sources. These include voluntary reports of errors by pilots and controllers, data downloaded daily from onboard computers on every big airliner, reports of maintenance problems and even incident data collected by other agencies, such as NASA. A dedicated team of analysts is responsible for making sure all these data sources are interoperable and for analyzing the information to identify accident precursors.

The industry has a central tenet of non-punitive incident resolution, to help ensure that systemic problems are identified and eliminated before they cause accidents. If fatalities occur, public and private experts work together to ferret out the root cause. But rather than wait months or years to issue a final report explaining all the complexities, interim findings are made public as soon as significant conclusions are reached. In this transparent framework, safety trumps confidentiality and litigation takes place after problems are identified and fixes are made.

Interoperability is essential in all aspects of child welfare. Using interoperable systems, children who need adoption can now be matched with adoptive families anywhere in the country. This should prove critical to the success of the new “Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act,” which requires relatives to be notified within 30 days when younger family members need out-of-home care. In one case, information sharing between a state and a private agency about a foster family’s background, coupled with competency-based training for both the caregiver and caseworker, may have helped prevent an infant’s death.

Safety, well-being and permanency are not needs unique to kinship caregivers or foster and adoptive parents. More families than ever require financial support and supportive schools. They need assistance with physical and mental health challenges. Poverty, drugs and discrimination bring families into the child welfare system and keep them there. Technology must address a client and workforce population that is multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-generational.

### **Time to Break the “Crisis” Cycle**

The U.S. Children’s Bureau was created in 1912 with the mission of setting standards and keeping the child safety on the nation’s political radar screen. The FAA, though not formed until almost five decades later, has achieved far more within its framework. No one can dispute that child welfare issues are complex and perplexing. Unlike airline workers, for example, the child welfare workforce often transports involuntary clients. Indeed, many child welfare problems may be described as “wicked” because they don’t lend themselves to simple interventions or one-dimensional solutions.

With the same sense of urgency that long ago prompted government and industry to work together to improve airline safety, we must advocate for the political leadership and public will to finally address our nation’s child welfare system. This requires a sufficiently staffed and competent workforce that integrates its passion for compassion with advanced technology that can share crucial data on local, state and federal levels. The result would be social workers, caregivers and managers who can do the right thing—and do things right—the first time, on time, every time. Otherwise, a new generation of politicians, agency administrators, caseworkers and caregivers and, most important, clients will continue to struggle with the same problems and tragedies. Another task force will be commissioned, and the cycle inevitably will begin again.

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