

# Advice to a New Child Services Leader



*“After 25 years helping children – first as a juvenile court judge, then as a director of a state child welfare agency – I can fairly state that no job in America is as rewarding and excruciating as a public leader in the tumultuous arena of child welfare.”*

- Judge James Payne, Ret.

## About the Author

James Payne is currently director of the Indiana Department of Child Services (DCS). Appointed to the newly created department in 2004 by Governor Mitch Daniels, Payne oversees an agency with 3,000 employees that is responsible for child protection and child support. Indiana DCS has received national recognition for its efforts to improve child protection, with measurable improvements in its Child and Family Services Review results. Prior to his appointment, Payne served for 20 years as juvenile court judge in Marion County, Indiana, where he developed case management software for juvenile justice as well as many programs that won statewide and national awards. Judge Payne has received numerous awards including the Distinguished Hoosier Award from the Indiana Governor's Office and the Juvenile Court Judge of the Year award for the State of Indiana.

## Acknowledgments

This booklet is about and on behalf of an extraordinary group of men and women who have accepted one of the most difficult roles in state government by becoming leaders of a child welfare agency. It is with great thanks and admiration for them that I have written this guide. They accept impossible tasks, with incredible responsibilities and frequently little acknowledgment of their efforts, and succeed in ways that are immeasurable. It is also dedicated to the families of those leaders – in my case my wife Terrie and two sons and their families – who often lose mornings, nights, weekends, and uncounted hours while their loved ones carry out the work demanded of them.

I want to thank Tracey Feild at the Casey Foundation for encouraging me to publish this. She and David Sanders were instrumental in supporting the thought that new child welfare directors, particularly those from outside the welfare discipline, could benefit from someone's perspective as they come into the role. A special thanks to Steve Goldsmith and Kathleen Noonan for their invaluable review and advice in making this readable and coherent. I also want to thank John Ryan as chief of staff, and my friend, for his steady hand and calm manner in keeping everything moving in the right direction. I hope this adds value and insight for new leaders in child welfare – and perhaps for some experienced ones as well.

The final and biggest thanks go to Governor Mitchell E. Daniels. Without his commitment, support, and resolve, none of the successes of the agency could have been started, much less been completed. He is the true hero for every child and family in Indiana.

James W. Payne, *Director, Indiana Department of Child Services*  
302 West Washington Street / Room E 306  
Indianapolis, Indiana 46203  
317.234.1391

For inquiries about the Indiana Department of Child Services, contact Ann Houseworth:  
Ann.houseworth@dcs.in.gov

# Foreword

Judge Payne never expected to run a public agency. For two decades, he served as the presiding juvenile court judge in Marion County, Indiana. However, in 2003, when businessman Mitch Daniels was elected governor, Judge Payne sent him a memo explaining what he thought needed to be done to improve the lives of Indiana children and families. Governor Daniels not only responded, he asked Payne to lead a newly established, cabinet-level agency for children and demonstrated his commitment to this new agency by signing into law caseload standards requiring the immediate hiring of hundreds of new child welfare workers.

I had the good fortune to receive a call from Judge Payne early in his tenure as director. From the start, he was open to advice, feedback, and criticism – anything that helped point the agency toward better outcomes for children. As a result of our conversations, the Annie E. Casey Foundation sent a team of consultants to work closely with the Judge and his agency in their early years. Quicker than I ever imagined possible, the Judge and his team hired more than 800 workers, created a new statewide training academy, and adopted a practice model and Quality Service Review process.

The Judge and his team continue their forward momentum today. Over the course of many years, their agency has relentlessly pursued better outcomes for children and families. Their efforts have paid off. Since 2007, the number of at-risk children receiving in-home care or placement with relatives increased, while the number of children placed in foster care or residential facilities dropped from 7,440 to 5,531.

The Casey Foundation's role in Indiana has continued; in addition, Casey Family Programs has recently launched a series of permanency roundtables to support Indiana's effort to increase permanency rates for older children leaving foster care.

This publication started in response to a new director's questions to the Judge and captures his candor, passion, and urgency, all attributes that led to his successful tenure in Indiana. He – reluctantly – agreed to let me read his memo and then – more reluctantly – agreed to let us help him publish it for other leaders. I know others engaged in public systems work will find his insights and instructions helpful to the difficult tasks that remain ahead.

## **Tracey Feild**

*Director and Manager, Child Welfare Strategy Group  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, Maryland*

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# Introduction

After 25 years helping children – first as a juvenile court judge, then as director of a state child welfare agency – I can fairly state no job in America is as rewarding and excruciating as a public leader in the tumultuous arena of child welfare. Yet, seven years into the job, I still love this work and feel an urgency to do more and do better.

When asked by a new state director recently if I had any “lessons learned” to pass along, I realized I did. In fact, I was surprised how much I had come to know, especially compared to when I started. This paper captures the more important lessons and provides suggestions based on my experiences, both good and bad. My advice is divided into four categories critical to the role of director – leadership, administration, communication, and data.

## Leadership

As a new leader, you arrive on the job with great expectations. You are expected to bring a new perspective and personality to the position and to relationships with external partners, such as the appointing authority, the legislature, the media, providers, and communities throughout the state. It is an awesome responsibility and opportunity but it wears hard and fast. Be prepared.

Remember that the assignment and role is first and foremost a gift, generally from the chief executive officer – the governor, county executive, or mayor. Reporting to, informing, aligning with, and acknowledging that individual as your guiding force and the reason for your success is an absolute requirement. Plan on regular meetings to describe your vision and mission, and plan to use resources and activities to improve goals related to child safety, family functioning, family preservation, and timely permanency. The person who appointed you should know your goals and why and how you are seeking to achieve them and receive regular data that show you are on the right track.

I have relied on five core leadership mantras that I will describe in more detail:

- Seek but understand change;
- Personalize your leadership;
- Showcase your credentials;
- Manage up – and get to know your state legislature; and
- Go national.

### SEEK BUT UNDERSTAND CHANGE

Change inevitably accompanies new leadership. Sometimes change was promised or demanded before you arrived; other times, change happens because you know it needs to occur. Change comes with the territory; either you lead it or it will drag you with it.

In the face of change, remember that your predecessor presumably began with lofty goals and heavy responsibilities, too. Assume policies and processes were put in place for a reason and implemented with good intentions. Don't deride a former leader; doing so tells those who created, managed, or practiced before you they were wrong. Put another way: always be mindful of the “WeBes” – We Be here before you and We Be here after you!

#### Developing a Change Strategy

- Don't push change for its own sake; change must align your agency's mission
- Be prepared: Change creates resistance and noncompliance
- Find change champions throughout the agency and recognize and reward them
- Remember, change requires frequent, clear communication

In fact, managing change is its own science. Most complications happen – based on my experience – during

implementation. To create successful change, you'll need to find and cultivate those who will accept, support, model, and champion your framework for change.

Also, remember that organizational change research reveals that most people need to hear a message at least eight times before hearing and understanding it – and it takes even longer for the change to actually occur. You want change to happen quickly, but it takes time – much more than I expected.

### PERSONALIZE YOUR LEADERSHIP

Leaders are often trained to not make things personal, especially if they come from occupations that value impartiality, such as the judiciary or legal professions. That won't work in your new role. Leaders of children's services agencies must demonstrate their personal commitment every single day. It's not easy: You must be able to advocate for the safety and well-being of children while also being able to talk about important complexities, such as balancing the parent's right to parent and the child's right to live safely.

#### Showing Who You Are

- Be passionate; talk from the heart
- Showcase your credentials
- Use personal examples
- Be an advocate
- Remember (and remind others) that you represent every child in the state and every staff member in the agency

Today, more and more agency leaders come from fields other than child welfare. You or members of your top team may lack deep knowledge of the day-to-day operations of a child welfare system. Know this: When a child is physically or sexually abused, neglected, or abandoned, there are lifelong implications for the child and those around him or her. It is essential to understand those implications. It is also important to

remember you are in your role for a reason; you must be able to articulate personal reasons why you took the job. Find a way to express your passion for the job and your personal commitment to bringing your best to the work each and every day.

**Example:** *My grandson was one reason I took this position. He was born at 23 weeks, weighing just 1 pound, 8 ounces. He was in intensive care for 90 days. He received care and attention from a number of social service agencies to transition from the hospital to home, and my family is indebted to many professionals who worked with him. In that experience I saw first-hand that teams of people and systems can help families in crisis, but they also can have the power to get in the way of families, or worse. I try to remind myself and DCS staff daily that the agency exists first and foremost to help children and families. This is not as easy as it sounds. Staff members interact with difficult families; your leadership team works routinely with reluctant partners. Keeping the agency's focus on purpose and personal commitment to children is a priority for any director.*

### SHOWCASE YOUR CREDENTIALS

In your first days on the job, there is likely to be a grace period by virtue of you being a new recruit. But soon you will need to find ways to highlight your credentials and build credibility to gain and keep the respect of staff, clients, legislators, the media, and the person who hired you.

If you were a judicial officer, legislator, or business leader, let people know that. What background prompted your boss to choose you? Remember that your previous jobs helped prepare you for this new position. Do not shirk these “old” designations; they were earned. Especially in settings like the legislature, talking before the media, or in well-attended meetings, references to your past professional life may boost your credibility.

If you are a former judge, remember that the right to be called judge, or justice, or “the Honorable” was also earned. When someone asks, “Should I call you

director, judge, or justice?” let them know being called judge or justice is just fine. Don’t demand or request it – but by all means allow it.

## MANAGE UP – AND GET TO KNOW YOUR STATE LEGISLATURE

Directors face acute challenges in both upward and downward accountability. You will need to pay substantial time and attention to the person who appointed you, perhaps to the director of a larger health and human services agency and, sometimes, to your state legislature.

Indeed, there is no position more likely to receive public scrutiny and criticism and press coverage than an agency responsible for child safety. Insist on having direct contact with the governor or mayor; that frequent communications will be important to you and your boss.

Developing a relationship with the legislature can be a challenge. Many executives dread legislative involvement. It takes time and can be unpleasant. Yet communicating, negotiating, and dealing with the legislature are critical to the appropriation and authorization process. To be a leader of change, you have to be all in. Be present, be visible, be vocal, and be passionate.

### Working with the Legislature

- Know them personally
- Testify whenever you can
- Have a champion – or several
- Meet often with leadership
- Know the protocol and customs
- Focus your message on your mission and change agenda
- Share the data
- Justify the investment

Tempting as it may be to delegate relationships with the legislature, don’t. Frequent personal contact is the only way to drive change. At the same time, having a seasoned, experienced legislative advisor on staff to help manage this responsibility can be a great help. Once you have a legislative advisor, trust and learn from him or her.

Get to know and understand the legislative process to achieve your goals and objectives. While most agency change efforts won’t require legislation, you may need to pursue legislation to codify important programmatic pieces of any transformation you have planned, such as caseloads standards, timelines for moving cases through the system, information technologies, accountability measures, agency legal representation, or passing required federal language, to name only a few.

*Example: In Indiana, this was especially important because the agency was brand new. When we started, we did not even have administrative staff or resources dedicated to personnel, data management, IT, etc. We also did not have any Memorandum of Understanding with our former umbrella agency as to how they would continue to support the department. Negotiating interim support as well as longer-term commitments took a significant investment of time on the part of my leadership team (about two people) and me. Making time to have regular meetings with the governor’s office and key legislative supporters so they understood and could articulate the child and family goals connected to our administrative and budget requests was critical to our early stability and success.*

## GO NATIONAL

A public leader’s responsibility does not end at the state or jurisdictional border. As one of a small number of child welfare leaders nationwide, you are among an influential group of individuals who will, during their tenure, be the face and voice of those who are protecting children. While each state and jurisdiction has its own particular characteristics, the fact is that as a leader, you will have an immediate bond with your peers.

### Strategies for Building a National Presence

- Participate in national events, conferences, trainings, and meetings
- Join national groups
- Explore national resource centers
- Work with foundations

Given this, active participation in national activities exposes you to a dynamic arena of trial and error and policy innovation. Day-to-day pressures certainly justify staying at home yet the need both to learn what works and become part of a collective voice on behalf of children argues for national participation. Look for opportunities to meet with other state leaders through organizations such as the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA), and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), to name only a few. The publications and information available through them are extraordinary.

In addition, federal national resource centers and foundations can provide a wealth of opportunities. Know and reach out to them. On the other hand, take new information with a grain of salt. Some ideas are hyped by a wishful organization or are based on conditions not applicable to your jurisdiction. Be selective and cautious, but do reach out to them.

Finally, there are many consultants who can give advice and provide support. Pick and choose carefully; get references from colleagues. There are also a number of foundations – the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and others – that provide advice and support. Take advantage of what they have to offer.

## Administration

As a new leader of a major agency, you are now an administrator. This means undertaking not just the complicated skills of managing a large bureaucracy, but also working across a network of stakeholders and resources and focusing them on a congruent vision with clear performance metrics. Most directors are not selected or trained for management proficiency and thus you must carefully prepare for a number of new responsibilities.

### MANAGE TO A VISION

As a new leader you must – above all – have a vision about what is being managed. You need to know where you want to go if you want to get there. Having a vision is particularly important for large government agencies. Once it is in place, though, then the hard part begins – staying focused in it and not getting sidetracked by the daily challenges of the position. This was one of my toughest challenges.

### Developing a Vision

- Know what you want to do
- Know where you want to go
- Be specific
- Communicate it
- Live it
- Measure it

Start by finding out if your agency already has a vision and mission statement. Also find out if specific departments have a distinct mission or statutory purpose (e.g., child support enforcement). Review all that you find to make sure they align with the approach of the elected official and you. If they do not, modify them. But, do not throw things out entirely unless it is obvious that they present a major impediment or barrier to your goals and vision.

If there are no vision and mission statements for the agency and its departments, create them. This may take

some time if the agency is creating a new vision and mission statement, but don't be concerned about the time since this effort will direct the remainder of your efforts in and outside the agency. Change requires a clear purpose congruent with the goals of the chief elected official. Along with a vision and mission, every children's agency needs a clearly articulated practice model. A practice model is the overall philosophy, approach, and daily activities that workers and managers use with clients. A practice model directs everything connected with and supported by the agency. Existing practice models should be reviewed for their consistency with your vision and mission, and updated and measured against best practice throughout the country. Once there is a clear practice model, confer with leaders and organizations in your state and from around the country to communicate its importance to your overall agenda. Your quality assurance system should ensure fidelity to your vision, mission and practice model. In Indiana, in addition to tracking quantitative data measures, we use the Quality Service Review because its hands-on, qualitative case reviews provide client-level and team feedback on child outcomes and system progress.

**Example:** *Indiana had no unified vision, mission, or practice model in 2005. The vision and practice models varied by county – all 92 of them. You can imagine the challenges this posed for staff and families. One of the first things we did in Indiana was to create a vision/mission by looking at other states, looking at businesses, having staff and stakeholders meet to discuss the direction, and then creating the vision and mission statements of DCS. These became standard discussion items and training topics for every staff meeting, every meeting in the local offices, and in emails and other forms of communication with staff. The practice model was more complicated and challenging to create. The effort required related to the theoretical aspects of child and family practice and information about practice models in use around the country. With the help and support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Indiana sent teams to another state to observe and analyze their practice. We then built a practice*

*model for Indiana— one that met our statutory and other requirements and also allowed us to “own” the practice. The new practice model was rolled out in stages as Indiana was adding hundreds of staff and building a new internal training program to support the new practice model and other statewide initiatives.*

## ASSEMBLE A GREAT MANAGEMENT TEAM

Recognize and accept that a great deal of time will be spent in meetings—as the old adage goes “meetings are the creative alternative to work.” When not in meetings, a new leader will be on the phone or e-mail, visiting field offices, meeting with partners and other stakeholders, or traveling. You will be busy. Since the leader will be involved in and doing so many things, the operation of the agency will be left to the management team. A good manager learns how to manage people and systems, a great manager learns how to choose a good management team who will manage people and systems. When the leader is away, someone else will be running the show and making things happen. Make sure you possess the authority to hire your management team, and that they are compensated for their responsibility and they accept and support without question the new vision and mission.

### Building a Management Team

- Have a great 2nd in command
- Meet frequently with your # 2
- Get briefed on the big stuff
- Don't get tied down in the small stuff
- Let the management team manage

The first and most important position is that of chief of staff or deputy director or commissioner, however that position is named. This is the chief operations officer and the person who will most fit the new leader's character and understand the leader's intentions, almost before the leader does. The chief should be the eyes and

ears on the ground, be able to manage multiple tasks at the same time, keep the leader informed of the systems and processes as they develop, and be prepared to stand in for the leader during an absence. The new leader and chief of staff should be available to each other at all hours of the day or night. The chief should be the leader's biggest cheerleader (publicly) and the leader's biggest critic (privately).

The other management team members must be expert at what they do in their particular roles and responsibilities. If they manage departments, they should know that field better than anyone else and be prepared to be good teachers so that you can learn quickly from them because you will be required to explain and describe the efforts and initiatives being undertaken. These management team members must be more focused on the product and the system being developed and be prepared to allow that to be coordinated by the chief, where necessary.

### **ENGAGE MIDDLE MANAGEMENT**

A great chief executive knows that middle management is where things succeed or fail. This means you must ensure that middle management staff hear and understand your vision and mission, know and support the policy and practice changes that are being put in place, and are prepared to make sure that those policies and practices are communicated to line staff and monitored. Ultimately, if middle management does not buy into your leadership vision and role, it will not succeed.

There is no substitute for contact between the agency leader and the middle managers. One way to do this is to convene a statewide middle managers meeting with a full day spent examining the vision, mission and goals of the agency. Even though this will likely be a large group, your passion and personal commitment about change are the quickest ways to signal that you are serious about the changes you are proposing. While there will be dissenters (this is a constant reality of the job), it is important to know your critics, and either win them over or help them decide it is time to move

on. Middle managers are far too critical to success of the agency for a leader not to spend considerable time attempting to win them over. However, at the end of the day, remember “improve them or remove them.”

After an initial meeting with middle management, a leader must find routine opportunities to engage them. There is no substitute for this. Consider doing this with videoconferences, webcasts, e-mails, notes, etc., that are specifically aimed to and for middle management. They must know that the leader respects, appreciates, and supports them. They must also know that, as long as they are following the vision, mission, practice model, and policies, the leader will never leave them standing alone when something does not go well. Once they understand the importance of the transformation, then they can become partners in the change process and teach and mentor others.

### **PRIORITIZE THE CFO AND BUDGET MANAGEMENT**

These are difficult and challenging economic times – although in children's services that always seems to be the case. For this reason alone, after the chief of staff, the most important person will be the budget director. This must be someone who knows state government, has an absolute grasp on state funding and budget issues both inside and outside the agency, and can give advice on the appropriate and acceptable compromises that will always have to be made in the state budget process. It is also helpful if the budget director understands public programs such as Medicaid and the nature of the case work practice. When compromises must be made, the balancing act of doing a job well, just barely making it, or not getting the job done at all are critical distinctions.

Everyone in government – federal, state, or local – is having this same struggle. Years or decades of conducting “business as usual” is no longer acceptable. Agencies must conduct their programs and services and operate as efficiently and as effectively as possible, recognizing that the agency and government can no

longer be “all things to all people.” This means the chief financial officer must know the budget and the line items in great detail, and must ensure that the agency leader has confidence that funding is sufficient to carry on the core responsibilities. The CFO must also know that, regardless of anything else, the decisions and compromises made will allow the goals and objectives of the agency to be met.

#### The CFO Must:

- Know agency priorities
- Work closely with legislative budget staff and budget agency
- Ask about program effectiveness
- Propose compromises on programs
- Not try to be all things to all people
- Put money where priorities are

Expect the chief financial officer to have close relationships with the budget agency of the state as well as the office of governor or mayor and to have frequent meetings with legislative fiscal analysts so that they also have confidence in the work that is being done. Because legislative members and their fiscal analysts will make decisions on budget matters, having as many allies as possible will be critical. Remember that the agency will be in competition with other agencies for limited dollars so it is not good enough to say that “it’s for the kids.” It will take much more than that to minimize the budget cuts and to justify the compromises made. Make no mistake, it can and must be accomplished. The passion and the vision and mission are far too important for this not to be completed successfully.

## Communication

At the end of the day, with all other factors considered, your success will depend primarily on your communication inside and outside the agency. Your communication may also be the only thing you can control. While much

of what is done in your agency will depend upon others, your communication depends only on you. I am quite certain that a failure of a leader to communicate will result in disaster. With this in mind, I have relied on four communication activities as leader of a public sector agency.

### COMMUNICATE WITH STAFF

Good communication is the single most important requirement of a new leader, particularly with a large and diverse staff, many of whom may be unwilling to accept the message in any event; others who have heard multiple messages only to find them fluid; still others who are eager to hear the message so they can be successful; and, finally, those who will hear the communication for their own ends or in their own way. Whichever the case, it is clear that failing to communicate will mean nothing gets done. There are a number of ways to communicate, all can be effective, but the important points are the attempt to communicate, the message being communicated, and the number of times important things are communicated.

There are a number of ways to communicate the message and to make sure that the same message is being communicated to others. They include:

- Regular newsletters with a message from the agency head;
- “Director’s notes” on a particular topic;
- Theme or position memos articulating the agency director’s position on topics;
- E-mails or other communication on a regular basis about a particular event, recognition of staff, or important announcement about agency staff or programs;
- Audiovisuals, webcasts, or other personal comments by the agency leader that allow the agency head to communicate with virtually all members of the agency at the same time;
- Regularly scheduled conferences or meetings attended by the agency head and/or others throughout the state to allow staff to hear about particular milestones, changes, and successes at the same time.

The purpose of communication includes letting staff know that the leader of the agency is working as hard as they are. They frankly don't know how hard it is to be a leader of a child welfare state agency – very few people do. When they see and hear the agency leader talking about issues of concern and importance, they begin to understand that the agency leader is spending as much time as they are caring about children and families. Finally, the agency leader is the visible image of the department. The staff want to be proud to be a part of an organization with a leader who is knowledgeable, available, informed, and also proud of the agency.

### TRAVEL THE STATE – REGULARLY

One of the most important activities you can do is to see and be seen in person. There are so many pressing meetings, events, responsibilities, and other work that it is very easy to stay in or around your executive suite. Resist this temptation at all costs. Get out whenever possible and visit the local offices, meet the staff, get to know them and let them get to know you, the agency leader. In many cases, this will mean getting up early in the morning and arriving home late at night or, in some cases, staying overnight. In the end, to build consistency, uniformity, trust, understanding, and credibility, there may be nothing more important than traveling the state, visiting the offices, shaking hands, delivering a message, and seeing and hearing what it's like in the field. Some of these field office meetings may be as simple as visiting the office. Others might include sitting down with, or even following, a worker or supervisor.

Bring handouts and materials related to important agency goals or outcomes so that messages they often receive in the rush of everyday business are granted special attention. Agencies too often (mine is guilty too) put out a new policy, directive or other information in ways that overwhelm staff. Staff deal with this stress by paying little attention to what they receive from “the central” office. Arriving at your office visits with handouts can reinforce the vision, mission, changes,

and outcomes that are occurring on a regular basis. This is particularly important as the agency goes through any major transformations.

#### Visiting Local Offices

- Always have a message(s)
- Meet with supervisors
- Have handouts for important information
- Bring your deputy
- Meet with local media
- Travel with the field deputy

While traveling a state like Indiana with 92 different locations was challenging, it was a critical part of what a leader has to convey – knowledge, passion, vision, action, dedication, and concern for those at the local offices. Do not allow the local offices to feel isolated and separated from not only the knowledge of what's occurring but the fact that they are a part of an important change or transformation. It became the practice to do that every year, sometimes by combining multiple local offices at one meeting location but nevertheless being available and present, and being as open and honest about the changes and challenges as possible.

I would often travel with another staff member, typically the communications director, legislative aide, or one of the top deputy directors, so that we would have time together and staff in the local field office would have contact with other officials in the department. Travel also provides uninterrupted time to make phone calls or to catch up on some reading that often cannot be done while in the office. An awful lot can be accomplished in three hours of car travel that cannot be accomplished in the office.

**Example:** *As the department was expanding its staff in the local offices, the possibility of distance and isolation became a great concern. The issue we had to address was how to ensure that the staff understood the transformation*

*as it was occurring and their specific and particular roles as that occurred. With staff in the local offices, a good distance away, working extremely hard with oppressive caseloads, it was clear that they would be overwhelmed with the changes and with understanding their particular responsibilities. We had to figure out how to communicate that and to do that as frequently as possible. The general rule of thumb is that it takes people hearing something eight times to understand it.*

*We therefore developed a process beginning with a new staff member's first day of employment. We held a formal public swearing-in ceremony that was attended by an elected official, often the governor, who would express how much they appreciated the fact that the new staff would be participating in this important effort of taking care of Indiana's children. The director presented a formal explanation of the staff member's role and importance, and a formal swearing in or oath of office was followed by pictures of the event. This set the stage for follow-up communications from the director to local staff.*

## **TALK TO THE STATE BUDGET AGENCY AND OTHER STATE BUDGET PARTNERS**

As a high-level member of state government, communication and relationships with the budget agency, executive branch members such as the auditor, and other necessary partners (corrections, education, etc.), will also promote the vision and agenda of your agency. Constant communication with the budget agency and members of the legislative bodies is critical because they are two of the most important partners for your agency. Being at the table, seeking substantial solutions to the challenging choices that others will have to make, and earning the trust of others will, in the end, ensure the best opportunity for success and support.

In good or challenging economic times, funding is an important part of any business or government initiative. Knowing and understanding the business, sharing financial information with the budget agency, demonstrating cost savings and efficiencies, and documenting and justifying additional funding requests, are all important steps in the transformation of the department.

## **CONNECT WITH THE MEDIA**

Child welfare systems are understandably defensive and fearful about the media. This may be one of their greatest weaknesses. Yet, the media, like government leaders, have a responsibility to perform and inform. Resisting or ignoring their responsibility will only cause further inquiry and less-supportive reporting.

### **Working with the Media**

- Meet with state press regularly
- Share data
- Give vision and goals
- Balance the regular work with the tragedy
- Report back regularly on progress
- Engage editorial boards, general managers, and specific reporters
- Have them assign reporters to child welfare
- Invite them to follow field workers

Do not underestimate the capacity of the media to be fair and important allies. Meeting with the press on a regular basis is essential to gaining trust and receiving balanced reporting. There are a number of ways to communicate with the media to develop a successful and fair relationship with them. In all probability, this will start for a leader by hiring a good communications director. This person should be someone who knows and understands the importance of the media, has good communication skills, is available and responsive to any requests or comments, and has a very good understanding of the agency vision and mission, as well as its practice model and policies.

Connecting with the media will also require you to be comfortable in front of them as the face and image of the department and as a representative of your chief executive officer – the governor or mayor. Be prepared to communicate with the media and understand issues of confidentiality, but also know that on individual

cases, the media often will have more information than the agency – at least initially, when a tragedy occurs. Understanding how to balance the news of a tragedy with the day-to-day work successes of the department is critical. Holding regular meetings with editorial boards and managing directors can go a long way to convince the media that your agency works hard every day to avoid tragedies.

You might also consider inviting the media to participate or shadow staff in their daily routines as a way to introduce them to the overall work of the department. While the media may have some questions about your motives and/or the seriousness of the offer, ask them to assign a reporter to ride along with staff to observe and report on the daily work of the agency. Inform them of the importance of confidentiality for individual clients and they will comply with that request. Given the opportunity to participate, reporters will be astounded by your openness and transparency, interested in the goals and struggles of the agency and its clients, and more balanced in their reporting. This is not to say that the media will not be critical at times, because they will and, in some instances, should be. It is to say, however, that the agency has to reach out regularly to inform the media of its agenda, progress, and challenges.

**Example:** *I decided to meet with the media throughout the state – print, multimedia, and others– during my travels to meet with staff. As a part of that, we gave a presentation to the media showing them our vision and mission, our goals and objectives, and what we intended to accomplish in the first year, and we invited them to report on these. I told them that we would come back within the next two years and report what we had accomplished statewide and within their media market. I also told them that if we were able to accomplish what we intended, we wanted them to report that, but if we didn't accomplish those things, then we wanted them to report that as well. In addition, I invited them to meet with our staff, go on visits with children and families, ride with our staff, and find out what they did and how they did it, so they had a clear understanding of what we were doing and how we were changing.*

## Data

In today's world and economy, having good data is a driving force. An organization that can demonstrate its effectiveness and efficiency is more likely to succeed and thrive. Using data effectively is one of the most important things that a child welfare leader can do. In my experience, I have prioritized three activities as a leader related to data.

### KNOW THE DATA

Agencies are now required to keep data and report that data publicly. Whether it is SACWIS data, Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) data, Fostering Connections data or caseworker monthly visit reports as required by the federal government, all of these and many others are important measurements that tell a leader how the system is performing.

#### Understanding Data and Reports

- Look at current data
- Look at national reports
- Manage to and by them
- Refine data to reflect changes
- Look at trends
- Ask questions about the data
- Consider data as a starting point

A new child welfare leader simply must know what the data are in order to be critical of practice that falls short of a standard and reward practice that exceeds a standard. Work very closely with the IT leader and data analysts to generate reports that show practice improvements (or lack thereof) in a manner that is easy to understand and explain. Some data can be so complex and challenging that the leader cannot use them, middle management cannot manage to them, and field staff do not trust them.

Here is the complicated part. Equally important for a leader is to understand that data are just that – data. They do not always provide answers, but instead may generate further questions. The problem with data is that there is a tendency to believe that management is interested in moving the data up or down depending on the category. Instead, data can provide some benchmarks or starting points for an inquiry and justification for the work being done. For instance, running the data on the length of time a case was open will not tell whether the closure of a case was the right thing to do, whether the services were appropriate, or whether the case worker exercised analytical and critical thinking skills to make an appropriate, thoughtful, and justifiable recommendation for closure. Data have their limits. Learn to use data as a starting point but not as an ending.

**Example:** *It was immediately clear to me that to be successful with the budget or legislative process, as well as the media, the agency had to have data to justify its requests or actions. It was also clear that if we did not measure what we were doing, we could not demonstrate that we had transformed the department and improved the lives of children and families. Therefore, we spent a great deal of time putting together “practice indicators” which would demonstrate that the efforts we engaged in actually were making a difference, having value, and worth the investment. We looked at data measures that were traditionally reported by the department and expanded those by drilling down to the local case manager, unit, local office, and region as compared to the state. This had the added benefit of allowing us to explain discrepancies and disparities that existed so that we could justify investments in different areas and explain better the need for uniformity and consistency in practice.*

## **PRIORITIZE CASELOAD AND WORKLOAD DATA**

Caseload and workload are two important but different elements. Caseload measures how many individual parties or units are assigned to a caseworker in the field. It may be 12 families during an investigative or

assessment stage or 17 individuals during an ongoing management stage. This is the easiest measure to look at and often is the one that funding sources, legislators, media, or others will look at. It also may be one of the areas that are used in a lawsuit or consent decree to set a performance standard.

While caseload is important, workload of a particular case may be as, or more important than, caseload. Workload, loosely defined, is that amount of time that it takes to do a particular activity or to handle a particular case. In most states, the practice model requires a certain amount of time, insight, family and extended-family contact, family group meetings, visits with children and families within a month, etc. These and a host of other requirements are what encompass a workload measure.

### **Caseload and Workload Data**

- Caseload (number of cases):  
easy to measure
- Workload (time required to do something):  
hard to measure
- Both are critical to success
- Review the data to reflect vision and mission
- Compare current data to other states
- Compare state data to national data to support budget requests

Having data regarding caseload helps to determine referral sources by county, district, or neighborhood, and should allow the management team to determine the areas that need specific staffing assignments or reassignments. Caseload information should also reflect data collected from the Hotline/child abuse reporting call system, the screen-outs, the assignments for investigation and assessment, the number of substantiated cases versus those investigated or assessed, and ultimately those cases assigned for agency intervention and services.

All of these data elements and others are important to be measured to understand the issues of caseload and workload.

Ultimately, ensuring that a case manager has a sufficiently low caseload so that she or he can adequately implement the agency's practice model will be the greatest contributor to success or failure of an agency leader. Do not underestimate or downplay this as a priority. Nothing is more important than ensuring that case managers have the ability to perform their required tasks. While there are many things that go into making a successful case manager (beginning with the hiring process, initial training, adequate mentoring, and supervision), when all is said and done, caseload and workload will determine successful case management and better outcomes for children and families.

**Example:** *When Indiana doubled its case managers, the goal was not to make the agency bigger, but to allow it to do better work by reducing caseloads and changing its practice model with children and families. We engaged in a process to measure caseload and increased new case managers in those areas with the highest caseloads. Over a three-year period, 800 new case manager positions were created in the state of Indiana and every month, sometimes weekly, the caseload for each case manager and local office was measured to determine where additional case managers were needed.*

*While best practice would dictate having qualified, trained, experienced supervisors available to support, mentor and advise those new case managers, Indiana did not have that luxury. As we were increasing new case managers, we also increased the number of supervisors so that each supervisor was managing the appropriate number of case managers. While there were growing pains in this, measuring and managing to this was the critical part so that everyone – the experienced case managers, the new case managers, and the supervisors – understood what the issues were and how the department was managing to achieve its commitment to lower the caseloads.*

## GENERATE AND MAKE AVAILABLE BETTER DATA

The first questions you might tackle as a new leader are where and how the data should be kept. Another question is how will that data be evaluated particularly in comparison to other states but also within your own state. Once an agency's vision and mission are established, an important next step is to identify whether and how they are being met. Over the past number of years, great progress has been made at the federal, state, and local levels to develop data measurements and tools. This means there are many resources for a new leader to review and build upon.

Almost every state has data measurements and elements, often driven by the Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR), National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data, Title IV-E reviews, and other opportunities that are often associated with funding services. The Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR), Title IV-B, and others are also triggers for measurements of effective practice, as is the Title IV-E Waiver under Section 1150. Even funding through private foundations will require data and outcomes.

Of course, you cannot ignore that all of this data means the state child welfare agency is in competition with other state agencies for better outcomes and more dollars, especially if those dollars are associated with better outcomes. In difficult economic times, and frankly even when economic times are better, the agency that has data to demonstrate its success will be the agency that receives additional funding. Chief executive officers such as the governor, budget agency directors, and legislative fiscal officers are all in the position of making sure that state dollars are invested wisely in programs, services, and systems that produce the best outcomes. Measuring outcomes through trend reporting is the best vehicles to demonstrate success.

# Conclusion

## **THERE WILL BE A TRAGEDY**

The terrible reality of the work that is done in child welfare is that there will be a tragic incident at some point, and whenever it is, it happens at a time that is critical to the agency. Understanding and addressing the issues stated above will help the agency, the director, and the administration respond to it. These tragedies are the cases in which confidentiality is most often tested and found lacking. This is when it is critically important to ensure that data are available, facts are determined, the media are informed, and any internal issues are addressed. It is also critical that you as the leader understand the difference between a tragedy that occurred despite appropriate practice and policy versus a tragedy that occurred as the result of negligent or intentionally wrong behavior. Your staff should know that their leader will stand behind them assuming their actions were not negligent or intentionally wrong.

Address the facts of the situation as quickly as possible. Make sure that management staff spend any time necessary to review allegations, gather facts, and provide a detailed report. Find a way within the limitations of confidentiality laws to share information with the public through the media. Openness and transparency are critical. Do not be in the position of over-defending but do not be in the position of over-reacting merely to give the appearance of addressing the situation. If the agency, through its staff, was negligent and culpable, accept responsibility. If circumstances suggest that policy and practice were followed, explain that and accept the results.

Throughout the process, it is critical to keep state communication staff advised, keep in touch with the governor or mayor's office, and make sure that important stakeholders are also advised. This may mean daily communication with those and others who need to know and have interest in the issue. It is also

vitaly important to keep staff aware. The historical data reflects that once a tragedy occurs – regardless of policy, practice, procedure, training, instinct, etc. – staff will change how they think and what they do. In all probability this will mean initially a willingness to recommend removal of more children, an unwillingness to reunify children, and a concern that every case that is touched by the agency will have the same consequences. It is important to reassure staff that their responsibility is to make good decisions and follow policy and procedure.

All this said, there is nothing that will prepare you as an agency leader for the first time tragedy occurs.

## **CONTINUALLY LEARN AND TEACH**

Child welfare is a field that is constantly changing and improving. There is not a week that goes by that will not intellectually challenge and stimulate an agency leader. While everyone may accept that, the countervailing problem is that the day-to-day activities will consume the agency leader. It will not take long for a new child welfare leader to ask “when will it slow down?” The answer is – never. That frankly is okay because it will motivate and stimulate you on a regular basis. The way to keep learning and doing in balance is to stay current on what is happening in child welfare, meet with colleagues as often as possible, reevaluate the vision and mission, direction and passion, and teach the same to others. Child welfare staff, at every level, also need to know that this study and learning is a part of the process and what makes a system better. Embrace it. Live it. Teach it.

There are any number of places to go to learn more about child welfare and what's happening. There is also a wealth of information to be studied for the topics listed above and more. Find those resources.

## GET IT DONE

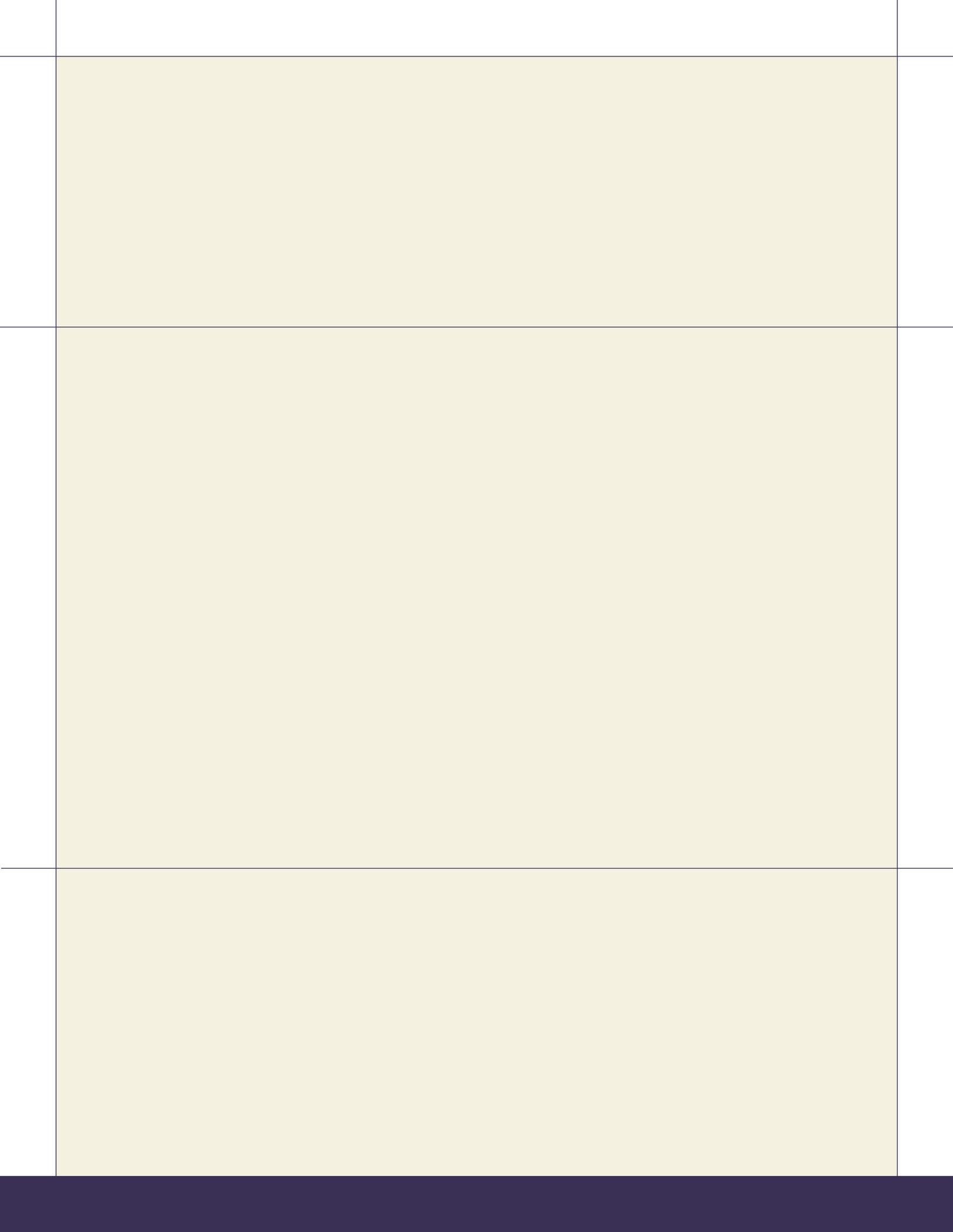
Just one final note: Timing is everything in almost every part of life. In this position, for better or for worse, and in almost every instance, the new leader of an agency will never have more credibility than at the start. As a leader, you were selected because of your skills and abilities, knowledge and experience, reputation and stature, and, finally, association by virtue of being appointed by the leader of the state or local government. With that, move as quickly as possible with the most important items identified. What are those things that conform to the mission and vision, establish the best opportunity for success, and need the most support? Move quickly and strongly on identified goals, target barriers for removal, and insist on successful implementation.

Your earliest requests may be for more money, casework field staff, resources, lawyers, executive positions, administrative positions, financial positions, contractual exceptions or freedoms, time exceptions, signature exceptions, or a myriad of other options. Whatever they are, make sure they are supportable, consistent, measurable, and capable of quick implementation. There will never be a better time to attain those things than at the start. Check with your executive team, get their opinions, listen to their concerns, and then insist on their support. They are the ones who will implement caseload standards, hiring and training of new staff, financial audits and evaluations, and all of the other decisions that are made.

A good rule of thumb: If it is to be done, let it be done quickly!

One other rule of thumb: Improve them or remove them! Identify key people or positions who are on your team and must support the initiatives. If they hesitate or do not accept the challenge, particularly early on, they cannot stay.

*Good luck!*



*“As a new leader, you arrive on the job with great expectations. You are expected to bring a new perspective and personality to the position and to relationships with external partners. It is an awesome responsibility and opportunity but it wears hard and fast. Be prepared.”*

*- Judge James Payne, Ret.*