



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION has developed a comprehensive portfolio of programs to give leaders—from public, nonprofit, private, and community-based organizations—the skills and tools they need to move from “talk” to “action” to improve outcomes for children and families. These results-based leadership programs enable participants to work on real issues in real time, build successful collaborative relationships, and hone their ability to use data to develop action plans and measure progress. The ultimate impact of this work is to sustain efforts to improve outcomes not just for current budget cycles, but for years to come. This case study provides an example of how one such program within the Baltimore City Department of Social Services helped leaders in that system work more collaboratively and produce measurable results to improve the lives of children in their community.

SHARPENING LEADERSHIP SKILLS TO IMPROVE CHILD OUTCOMES IN BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

What does it take to successfully turn around a large child welfare system so that it better serves thousands of children and families?

At the Baltimore City Department of Social Services (BCDSS), it has taken the visionary leadership of Director Molly McGrath and the strong commitment of her staff to change the culture, practices, and results of an agency that oversees 60 percent of the children in Maryland’s child welfare system. The results, to date, of the work by McGrath—who became the leader of the then-embattled agency in January 2008—and her 2,400 staff members in 19 locations throughout Baltimore are dramatic. Between 2007 and 2010:

- The number of children in foster care dropped 28 percent, from 6,342 to 4,566.
- The number of children placed in group homes dropped 71 percent, from 1,251 to 365.
- The number of children awaiting adoption dropped 57 percent, from 506 to 217.
- The number of annual adoptions rose 59 percent, from 265 to 422.
- The number of children with permanent families rose 47 percent, from 1,327 to 1,946.

- The percentage of children placed with families rose from 71 to 81 percent.

The story behind these numbers is not only about *what* was done but *how* it was done; not only the *actions* taken but their successful *execution*—and the leadership skills that requires.

McGrath was hired to improve the agency’s performance and change its approach so that Baltimore City followed Maryland’s guiding principles for child welfare that all children deserve a family and should have a say in their future.

“Molly knew where we were going and it was her job to drive Baltimore City there. That’s what she did. She took Baltimore City from worst to first,” says Brenda Donald, who served as Maryland’s Human Resources Department Secretary until July 2010 and is now a vice president at the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

To get the job done, McGrath first had to change some basic practices that had led to widely varying worker caseloads, unfocused supervision, and inconsistent collection and use of data in decision-making.

In May 2010, McGrath’s successful development and implementation of changes that improved the well-being of children in Baltimore’s foster care system



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Maryland Human Resources Department Secretary

Above: Molly McGrath with Michael Becketts (top)
Kiara Bonner, Molly McGrath, and Chante Bonner (bottom)

earned an innovation in state public service award from the American Society for Public Administration’s Maryland chapter.

Citing McGrath’s leadership of a comprehensive reform effort, the society noted that “she is widely credited with establishing a mandatory training module for supervisors, improving frontline service to customers, collecting better data, and using that data to inform decisions and improve services.”

McGrath, in turn, recognizes that her ability—and her staff’s—to successfully execute these innovations is due, in part, to leadership development programs and support funded by the Casey

Foundation, that preceded and coincided with the agency’s overhaul.

First exposed to the Foundation’s approach to leadership development in 2001 when she was selected as a Casey Children and Family Fellow, McGrath sought leadership development for her senior staff so they could gain the skills and competencies needed to improve the agency’s results for children and families.

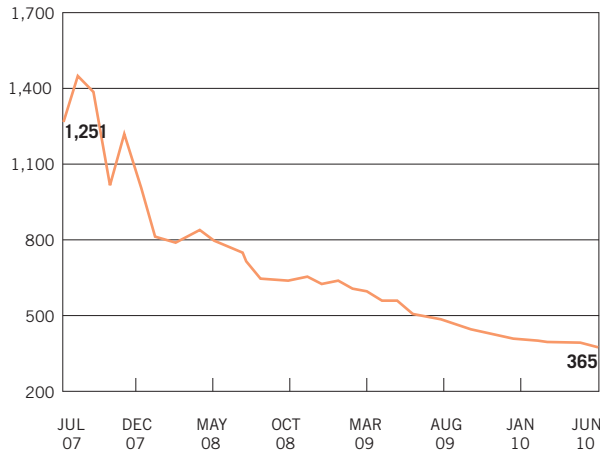
“Casey’s investment in me has had a tremendous impact,” says McGrath. “I know what a difference it made to me. Part of *my* job is to invest in the people around me.”

In 2009, her staff began participating in an approach to leadership development called results-based leadership (RBL) that stems from the Foundation’s conviction that having leaders work together effectively toward a shared result is key to achieving measurable and lasting improvements in child and family well-being. Through RBL work, McGrath’s staff learned how to:

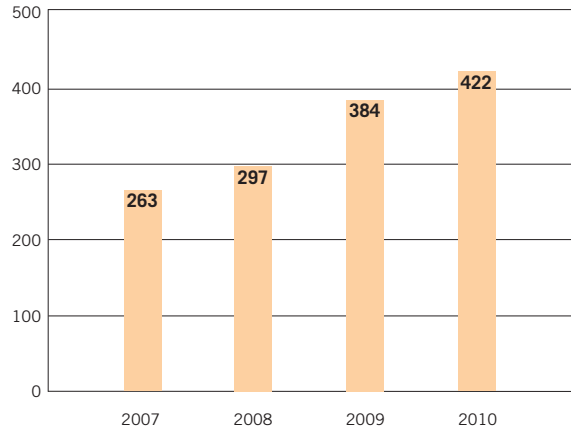
- Focus on results by using Results-Based Accountability, an approach developed by Mark Friedman that includes defining a result, engaging partners to achieve the result, and using data to assess progress.
- Remain focused on issues of race, class, and culture in order to reduce disparities.
- Use their own strengths and the strengths of their colleagues to be accountable for taking actions to improve results.
- View themselves as change agents capable of leading from whatever position they hold and collaborating to build consensus and make group decisions.
- Directly apply these principles to real work.

“As the progress in Baltimore demonstrates, leadership is a powerful lever for change. The impressive results achieved by the Baltimore City DSS team under Molly’s leadership show that it’s possible to reform vital yet complicated child-serving public systems such as child welfare. This kind of thoughtful, sustained, and courageous leadership is critical to improving outcomes for the children and families these systems serve,” says Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Casey Foundation.

Children Placed in Group Homes



Adoptions



“Having a strong leader at the helm is an important start,” says Jennifer Gross, senior associate with the Talent Management/Leadership Development unit of the Casey Foundation. “But the sustainability of large public systems change relies on the painstaking work of leaders ‘in the middle’ who are there day after day, year after year. Attention to the leadership needs of these individuals can support the critical role these staff play to both spur and sustain meaningful change for vulnerable kids and families.”

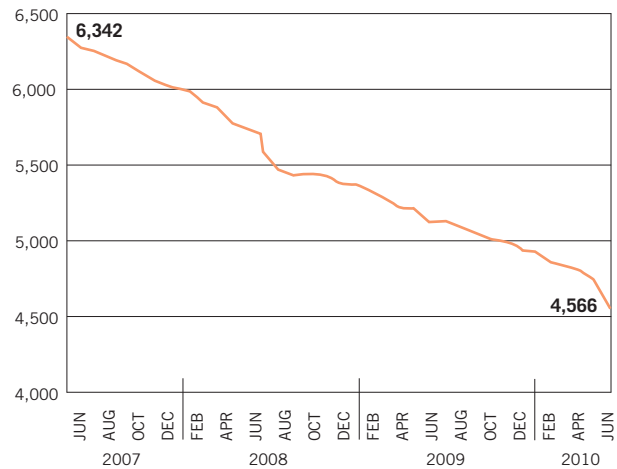
EXECUTING INNOVATION

When McGrath arrived in Baltimore, the city’s troubled child welfare system was poised for change. Maryland had a new statewide child welfare reform agenda, “Place Matters,” focused on providing children with permanent families, keeping them in their communities, placing them in families first, minimizing their length of stay in out-of-home care, and managing with data.

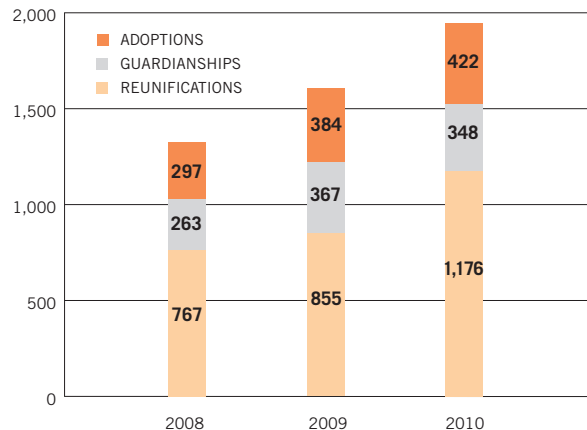
And the state was committing new resources—infrastructure support and new talent such as McGrath—particularly in Baltimore City. Originally brought in as second in command in 2007, McGrath became director within a year.

“Baltimore City was so important—it has two-thirds of the state’s kids in foster care—if you’re going to make a difference, you’ve got to make sure the reforms stick in Baltimore City,” says Brenda Donald. “I wanted to make sure they had the resources to do

Children in Out-of-Home Care



Exits to Family Settings



Source for all charts: Baltimore City Department of Social Services

the job. My job was to give Molly what she needed, stand back, and let her run with it.”

This backing was critical. “If I had just gotten the best and brightest and put her over there without the support, she would have done better than most. But she couldn’t have had the results she had,” says Donald.

To make change happen, McGrath—who had over 20 years of social work experience in West Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Chicago—first had to learn how her agency operates. She sorted through information and paid attention to the minutia of daily agency operations, such as how and whether calls to the agency are answered and how and when decisions about placement are made.

The effort to really understand these details of daily operations is a process that “will wear you out and send you home exhausted,” she says. “But these are the things that can be the difference between a decision that keeps a child safe or one that puts them at risk.”

To better understand what her staff members needed to succeed, McGrath, at times, worked alongside them on the parts of their job that were particularly hard or not going well.

And she learned, for example, one reason why Baltimore City was placing so many children in group homes rather than in homes with a relative or foster care parent that offer the best chance for children to thrive: Caseworkers had a ready list of group homes to call.

“There was no list of phone numbers for foster parents. So we had to fix that,” says McGrath. “Then we had to change the business practice for how we place a child so it is never a decision made by one person.”

Overall, what McGrath found was an agency that “was the ball and chain of the state,” she says. “It was a place that lacked business practice...which created a series of really challenging problems.”

Management was top-heavy with supervisors, yet caseworkers often lacked supervision or support and were haphazardly assigned work, whether it was filing reports or seeing a child. Some caseworkers had many cases; others a few. There was distrust among the senior management team. Staff members worked in isolated “silos” and didn’t communicate.

While individual caseworkers knew where “their” children were, no one knew the big picture, which kept them from being held accountable for contributing to the overall number of children placed in group homes, which in 2007 was one-fifth of the caseload—higher than the national average. (Today it is just 8 percent of the caseload.)

Caseworkers also were making placement decisions “without support, guidance, oversight, and supervision,” says McGrath. “So imagine the life of the worker, who has an unbalanced distribution of work, very little guidance, with many different people giving directives. There’s so much static in the environment and all those workers in very good faith were struggling to get something done.”

To correct this, caseloads were standardized. Supervision was strengthened, so each caseworker has a supervisor and no decision about a child’s welfare is made in isolation. Communication was improved. Data were better organized and used to drive decisions to improve results and accountability.

McGrath also flattened the management structure, worked to improve the agency’s public reputation, and made herself more accessible than previous directors in order to encourage collaboration.

She talks regularly with youth in foster care—some even have her cell phone number—as well as with biological and foster parents. The director’s office—once off-limits to staff—has an open-door policy and a collaborative approach to change-making.

The message to her staff, says McGrath, is: “We’re going to be a group of people that talks together and figures out...how we’re going to solve problems and make decisions that everyone can live with and understand.”

“I’ve not made a single decision here without lots and lots of input,” says McGrath. “Sometimes I’ve had to say, ‘I’ve heard what everyone says, I’m going to go in a different direction, but let me explain why. And the buck’s going to stop at my desk.’”

Because it’s not enough to ask staff members to do things differently—they need to be given concrete ways to accomplish a task and determine if they’ve succeeded—McGrath also instituted a new management strategy with three components:

- *Guiding Principles* authorize senior managers to make decisions as long as they follow five



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– Lynn Mumma, BCDSS Deputy Chief of Staff for Child Welfare Programs

Above: Lillie McNeill and Stephanie Whitehurst (top) and Lynn Mumma (bottom)

principles—an equitable distribution of work; a one worker-one child policy; one “system of record”; supervision of every worker and every case; and a commitment to enacting reforms with minimum disruption for both staff and children.

- *An Implementation Plan* establishes a three-step business practice for implementing any improvement. Known within the agency as “the waltz” (imagine a couple waltzing, 1-2-3, 1-2-3), the steps include: breaking a task down into component parts, each requiring attention by specific people; creating structured activities to

accomplish each part; and setting deadlines and accountability measures for each activity.

- *Using Data* helps identify whether a trend is moving in the wrong direction, triggering staff members to develop no-to-low cost plans to reverse the trend and “turn the curve.”

“While it sounds simple, it requires a lot of design at the front end,” says McGrath. But doing this front-end work is essential for accomplishing change and isn’t done often enough, she says, adding, “That’s the weakness of bureaucratic systems.”

The new strategy “provided psychic relief for the entire agency,” says McGrath. “Everyone was walking around being real friendly and nice and caring about kids but we weren’t getting the things done that kids needed. Now when we want to get something done, we start picking tasks off. One-two-three. One-two-three. It took a long time for everyone to understand it but now they can do it independently.”

For example, this three-step process—“the waltz”—was used to implement the improvement of “stepping down” children in group homes to less-restrictive settings.

STEP 1

One component part identified was a list of children on a worker’s caseload.

STEP 2

The structured activity developed to address this component part was a one-page strategy tool used to make the decisions necessary to step down children on the list.

STEP 3

A deadline was set to make sure the structured activity was completed and children were stepped down whenever possible.

To further this work, other business practices were changed. A list of foster care homes was created and distributed. Protocol was changed in order to make it easier to place a child in a relative’s home or a foster care home than in a group home.

For a group home placement, caseworkers now have to fill out more forms and get a supervisor out of

bed. “All I did was make the thing I *don’t* want them to do harder,” says McGrath.

Using tools like “the waltz” has been “absolutely revolutionary” especially in human services where “as a field, we have historically struggled to develop effective management tools,” says Lynn Mumma, BCDSS’ deputy chief of staff for child welfare programs who arrived at the agency in August 2010.

“Most people here are very well-intentioned and are trying to do the best job they can. Yet our data say that we still have a lot of work to do to improve our outcomes on many measures. So how do we get to the individual level and change behavior?”

The discipline of this three-step process helps by taking a task and “making it clear, breaking it down,” says Mumma. “It’s specific. Enormous energy can get lost by anything that’s not clear.”

Making the agency’s work more “data-driven” was a particular challenge because “most agencies fear data,” says McGrath. When she arrived, data were not well reported or used. “Everyone was submitting reports all the time on all kinds of things at these really odd intervals,” she says.

McGrath had the data boiled down into one report issued on the 15th of every month, with 12 indicators of well-being for every child in foster care. As a result, she says, “I know exactly where each of them are and a handful of things about them that helps me make decisions.”

Managers were given a new responsibility during weekly Monday morning meetings with McGrath—to routinely report on data and lead decision-making to reverse any negative trends.

This took some getting used to, says Roberta Lucas, a 30-year BCDSS veteran who began as a case-worker and is now a program manager. “When someone would present numbers that didn’t look too good, people were personalizing that and not understanding that the purpose was not to criticize but to understand and use the data to improve,” she says.

Attitudes changed “as we began to understand the figures and our part in making sure that our program was progressing so that the figures were improving,” Lucas adds. “When someone tells you ‘This is your goal. This is what you’re going to do.’ You own that more. That’s a good use of data—not to judge the service we provide but to enhance it.”

Overall, when executing innovation, McGrath has relied on two basic beliefs: “Pace Matters” and “A Diaspora of Effort.”

“I was brought here to change the place,” McGrath explains. Knowing this would inevitably “cause distress in the environment,” she sought to move swiftly because “stillness begets fatigue and movement begets energy.”

And change was accomplished by scanning the environment, scattering seeds of innovation, standing back to see what sprouts, and using this information to decide what seeds to scatter next. “We’re making it up every day,” says McGrath. “Every time you step you get a little more information to decide where to step next.”

The goal, says McGrath, is to create “a very different environment that has an open heart, an open hand, and an open door; is interested in what everyone says; fearless in the face of data; and present for kids, families, and partners across the city.”

DEVELOPING LEADERS

Developing a new generation of capable leaders of public agencies serving disadvantaged children and families is critically important to McGrath. “The catastrophe waiting to happen in child welfare is a lack of a bench,” McGrath says. “We need people who can do these jobs...who are developing the leadership skills to run these places. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

While big changes were underway at BCDSS, McGrath wanted to give agency managers and supervisors leadership development support to help them play a collaborative role. “I didn’t think people had the skills they needed to make these changes,” says McGrath.

“I could not have done this without leadership development support for my team, which was very important because it was building a skill set for people to use in an environment where they saw me using certain skills and changing the way I want the place to behave.” McGrath knew the importance of leadership development work from her experience with the Casey Fellowship, which helps professionals broaden their skills, knowledge, vision, leadership capacity, and professional networks so they can reform systems that serve children and families.



“It gives staff members a sense of accomplishment and pride to put children in a home that they’re going to get adopted into or to place children back with their parent.”

– Charsa Palamore, BCDSS Program Manager

Above: Lillie McNeill (top)
Cynthia Perkins and Charsa Palamore (bottom)

Today McGrath continues to use “everyday things I learned in my fellowship,” including “how to see systems and understand systemic behavior” as well as “rote skills on how to intervene, facilitate conversations, authorize activities, and engage people in collective work.”

As McGrath’s experiences in a series of government agency jobs shaped her ideas about how to implement change and apply the learning from her fellowship, on-the-job coaching with Jolie Bain Pillsbury, who designs and facilitates RBL work for many Casey leadership programs, helped her refine her thinking, make strategic choices, understand interpersonal

dynamics, and, she adds, “reframe the inevitable frustrations that come from working in government into opportunities.”

McGrath likens her relationship with Pillsbury to that of a coach and athlete, saying her coach is “a resource and support to me personally that makes me better professionally and more resilient.”

Coaching particularly helped McGrath tackle the big challenge in Baltimore, which she realized she couldn’t do on her own. “I needed the whole team,” says McGrath. So she requested Casey Foundation support for an RBL program to strengthen agency supervisors’ ability to use the new management strategy to improve Baltimore’s child welfare system.

“The program was designed so leaders in the middle could pick up their leadership and... could own the thought process, problem-solving, implementation precision, and passion in their own way,” says Pillsbury who designed the program.

Starting in June 2009, more than 30 staff—executive team members, program managers, and unit managers—were introduced to RBL tools and methods. Individual coaching was provided. Although the original idea was to have a short-term intensive program, McGrath and her staff soon saw the value of ongoing coaching and skill building, which has been continued, with Casey support.

As a mid-level leader and a relative BCDSS newcomer, program manager Charsa Palamore says the training has helped her work with staff at all levels to implement changes. It offered valuable personal insights and provided a common language and skill set to use in achieving specific goals within a specific deadline.

“It helped us to see Molly’s vision, to understand where she’s coming from, and her thought process,” says Palamore, who manages staff overseeing the cases of children in foster care. And it helped Palamore help her staff members “to understand that this was a good time for change, to let go of the old ways, to see that we were not losing but gaining and updating.”

“Molly often tells us, ‘You are the leader. We need you to lead in a way that you will have people want to follow,’” she adds. “Since I’ve done that, I have gained my staff’s trust and respect, which was needed.”

The program developed for the agency was based on Pillsbury’s *Theory of Aligned Contributions*, a framework for developing leaders who collaborate and seek

to hold themselves accountable for solving problems, addressing issues, and achieving measurable improvement over time.

The goal is to go from talk to action that produces results. “[RBL] work builds a way of communicating, of having standard business practices, of being clear whose job is what, of getting everyone the support they need to succeed,” says McGrath.

Staff learned how to develop and track their work using Results-Based Accountability. “Most government agencies think accountability means to get someone in trouble,” says McGrath. But her staff learned a different definition—“that we can collectively hold ourselves responsible for causing things to occur in this agency and create success for the caseworker.”

Staff also did exercises to improve self-knowledge, communication, and collaboration. “I was shocked that it was so helpful,” says Roberta Lucas. “It helped with interpersonal relationships, forming working relationships, and understanding people’s working styles. We have a real team now.”

Before the program, morale was low and some staff members were “tentative” about participating, says Lucas. But this changed as managers learned how their work is interconnected, how they can lead from the middle, and how they can go beyond following directives to inventing solutions collaboratively.

“Everyone used to have tunnel vision and you didn’t really care about what the other programs were doing because that was *their* problem,” says Lucas. “Now there’s a reciprocity of support between program managers. The RBL program has become like a workgroup for the agency’s goals.”

Staff members also went one important step further by deciding to hold themselves accountable for improving the agency’s performance and sustaining it. “It happened because they saw that things were changing for the better,” says Charisa Palamore.

“They saw the value in what they were doing, that it wasn’t about attacking them but the problem. It gives them a sense of accomplishment and pride to put children in a home that they’re going to get adopted into or to place children back with their parent.”

Beyond the creative solutions BCDSS designed, what is most impressive is the agency’s ability to successfully execute innovation, says Pillsbury, adding, “It’s so rare that things are implemented well enough to produce good results.”

Noting the leadership growth of McGrath and her staff, Pillsbury says, “I can make a connection between Molly’s capacity to do things and not only her qualities as a leader but her experiences and development. And then when I see the shift in what her leaders in the middle are capable of doing and how they’ve shifted in their focus... there are very powerful ways to see the impact of the leadership program.”

As McGrath puts it, the ongoing challenge for people working in large child welfare agencies is “personal sustainability.”

“These are very, very hard jobs,” she says. “We get paid poorly, we get our names blasted in the newspaper and get yelled at every time something bad happens, despite the fact that we all show up every day and try to put our shovel in the ground. What leadership development opportunities do is sustain me.”

And ultimately, RBL training has helped improve prospects for vulnerable children in Baltimore. That work is not yet done, says McGrath. But, she notes, “the data showing all those dramatic shifts would not have happened without that learning. Part of what caused things to succeed dramatically was the use of accountability and the skills my staff learned to implement a very different business practice in a big urban child welfare system.”

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs. For more information, visit the Foundation’s website at www.aecf.org.

Cover photos: Stephanie Whitehurst and Jolie Bain Pillsbury (left), Antonio Hayes and Cynthia Perkins (center), and Michael Becketts (right) / Writer: Betsy Rubiner / Photography: © André Chung, William Jackson