Evaluation of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's On the Frontline Initiative

Final Report
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Authors

Leanne Heaton, Ph.D., LCSW
Kristen Woodruff, Ph.D.

Bryan Williams, M.P.S.
Susan Chibnall, Ph.D.

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Executive Summary

Background

On the Frontline (OTF), an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Child Welfare Strategy Group, is a front-end effort to enhance a child welfare agency's organizational capacity to improve decision-making practices, and ultimately improve child safety. According to OTF, strengthening the front end of the child welfare system involves the implementation of three concurrent strategies: (1) build a strong workforce, (2) strengthen system decision making and (3) strengthen worker decision making. The Build a Strong Workforce (Workforce) strategy aims to address workforce stability and competence, bringing both human resources (HR) and child welfare staff to the table to improve hiring practices. The Strengthen System Decision Making (SDM) strategy aims to develop a system feedback mechanism that combines quantitative data measures with qualitative case review data to observe patterns, identify issues and create data-informed solutions to improve practice. The Strengthen Worker Decision Making (WDM) strategy focuses on understanding how frontline decisions are made and implementing strategies to support and improve decision making. To test the OTF concept, Casey invited three public child welfare agencies to implement the three concurrent strategies, which they began in January 2015. Two agencies, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and Jefferson County, Colorado, sustained these efforts and are the focus of this implementation evaluation report.

Evaluation Methods

Guided by the initiative's logic model, the OTF implementation evaluation tested conceptual linkages between activities (e.g., workforce hiring activities) and expected outputs (e.g., vacancy rates and turnover and the theorized relationship to child safety). The evaluation examined seven questions regarding the implementation process:

1. What was the process of site selection?

2. How do stakeholders define the OTF initiative's purpose, goals and key activities?

3. Was the OTF initiative implemented as intended?

4. What aspects of implementation have gone well? What have been the barriers?

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5. What results were observed in expected OTF outputs?

6. Are there signs of an emerging shift toward improvement in child safety outcomes?

7. What are the key lessons learned and recommendations?

The evaluation team used a retrospective, mixed methods evaluation design. For the qualitative portion, we conducted interviews and focus groups at each site and with Casey leaders and consultants, completed an extensive review of more than 120 documents pertaining to OTF development and conducted thematic analysis. The quantitative study consisted of a web-based survey in each site and analysis of quarterly administrative data compiled during OTF implementation. We conducted descriptive analysis of survey data and interrupted time series (ITS) analysis of administrative data to assess whether trends changed once OTF was introduced.

Evaluation Findings

Participants from both Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties reported that they had extensive agency and Casey resources available to champion the work. Casey technical assistance (TA) helped them form a steering committee and establish work groups to implement the three OTF strategies. Each work group developed a work plan and began implementing activities for each strategy, initially focusing on the front end but soon extending activities across program areas.

The Workforce strategy showed consistent implementation and positive results. It was clearly defined, with prescribed activities guided by TA consultants with expertise in child welfare and HR. Both sites used data to predict hiring needs and revised their hiring process. They implemented pre-vacancy positions, continual job postings and realistic job previews and implemented a team-based approach to the interview process, assessing behavioral-based competencies to do the job. The sites differed in that Jefferson County developed an automated position tracking report to predict hiring needs, whereas Cuyahoga County used data but is still developing an automated report. And, in these different contexts, the team-based approach in Cuyahoga County engaged supervisors and managers in hiring teams, whereas Jefferson County engaged supervisors and caseworkers. Both sites noted challenges in implementation, but both also felt positive about the Workforce strategy.

Based on multiple data sources, there was preliminary evidence of decreases in vacancy rates, time to fill a position and, in Jefferson County, turnover. Vacancy rates decreased in both sites, based on

administrative and qualitative data. The strongest evidence comes from an ITS analysis in Jefferson County, showing that the OTF initiative was associated with an estimated 5.7 percent decrease in vacancy rates compared to baseline, although no causal connection can be made. Time to fill positions also decreased, as evidenced by administrative data in Jefferson County (43 days fewer, on average, in ITS analysis) and qualitative data from both sites. Administrative data provide preliminary evidence of some improvement in turnover in Jefferson County, where turnover was increasing during baseline but began to decrease once OTF began; however, staff perceptions varied. Cuyahoga County's administrative data showed consistently low turnover rates (2.5-4.1%) during the implementation period, although no baseline data were available for comparison.

Sites successfully engaged in the expected SDM activities with some notable parallels but also key differences. Both sites developed and used actionable data, which facilitated the work of all three work streams. They created site-specific indictor measures and reports and increased their use of data to inform decision making at the agency level. They integrated data into their managerial oversight process to identify and respond to practice-related issues. Both created system feedback mechanisms that were agency specific. Cuyahoga County chose to implement the recommended OTF ChildStat model, while Jefferson County developed Red Team-QA (quality assurance), a process that built on their existing infrastructure, as well as other system feedback processes, including internal focus groups and an annual staff satisfaction survey followed by efforts to address staff concerns. In the end, both sites accomplished the original objective to enhance agency and managerial capacity to identify and respond to "systemic barriers affecting frontline work." There was, however, considerable variation by site in participants' experiences with implementation of system feedback mechanisms.

Sites took different implementation approaches to WDM activities. Each site approached the development of actionable data distinctly. Cuyahoga County set out to compile information from other administrative data sources for frontline caseworkers to support their decision making; although they faced barriers, this was the catalyst for a caseworker iPad resource app. Jefferson County decided to use their existing data resources to create a system-wide process to improve agency practices. Both sites made efforts to reduce workloads, and Jefferson County developed several tools to support this work. Both sites developed a supervisory model or process. Jefferson County implemented the supervisory process, which, participants said, provided increased consistency in individual supervision.

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WDM results were mixed. Qualitative findings support workload reductions in both sites. In Jefferson County, administrative data provided empirical evidence of this. OTF was associated with a decrease in the average number of new assessments per worker (an estimated 1.1 fewer new assessments per month, on average) in ITS analysis. Participants perceived some improvements in supervision. On the worker decision-making indicators, there was evidence of improved timeliness in decision making for non-investigative assessments in both sites, but no evidence of improvement for decision-making quality measures; findings for the remaining WDM indicators varied by site.

Lessons Learned and Cross-Cutting Key Findings

Participants in the OTF initiative learned three collective lessons: (1) engage staff at all levels and across all programs; (2) create clear and agency-specific plans and goals and stick with them and (3) develop a system feedback loop, and be open to reflection and feedback from all levels, including frontline caseworkers. The evaluation team identified five key cross-cutting findings: (1) OTF was resource intensive and technical assistance was essential; (2) agency leadership and contextual factors influenced implementation; (3) the Workforce strategy showed consistent implementation and positive results; (4) the SDM strategy led to increased use of actionable data and highlighted the importance of frontline caseworker feedback and (5) the WDM strategy varied in implementation and showed mixed results.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the evaluation team recommends several approaches for future implementation in other sites pursuing similar reforms:

Recommendation #1. Replicate the Workforce Strategy in Other Jurisdictions. The OTF designers set out to improve the hiring process and stabilize the workforce by implementing activities connected to the Workforce strategy. While both sites differed in context, they developed parallel methods that changed their hiring practices, reduced vacancy rates and reduced time to fill positions. We expect, if approached in a similar manner with the necessary infrastructure, that similar positive results would emerge in other sites. We recommend replication and further evaluation of the Workforce strategy.

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Recommendation #2. Replace the WDM Strategy. WDM varied in implementation and showed mixed results. We recommend that the OTF designers consider several ideas to inform replacement of the WDM strategy with supervision and coaching.

Recommendation #3. Add a Direct Frontline Caseworker Feedback Process to the ChildStat Model (or alternate system feedback mechanism) as part of the SDM Strategy. Direct frontline caseworker views are essential for a system feedback process, and the ChildStat model does not provide one.

Recommendation #4. Refine the Outputs in the Logic Model and Their Measures. We recommend refining the following outputs: worker competence; increased awareness between front-end practice and permanency; improved assessment quality; and improved understanding of policies by staff outputs, so agencies and evaluators can measure them more effectively.

Recommendation #5. Consider Sequencing Implementation, Particularly in Large Sites, to Make the Process More Manageable. Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties executed all three strategies at the same time and saw the value in concurrent implementation. However, they also said if they had prioritized, they would have chosen Workforce to stabilize vacancy rates. It may be worthwhile to prioritize them in sites that are interested in OTF but are unable to initiate all three simultaneously because of the size of the site.

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1. On the Frontline: Introduction and Background

On the Frontline (OTF), an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Child Welfare Strategy Group, is a front-end effort to enhance a child welfare agency's organizational capacity to improve decision-making practices, and ultimately improve child safety. According to the OTF designers, strengthening the front end of the child welfare system involves the implementation of three concurrent strategies: (1) build a strong workforce, (2) strengthen system decision making and (3) strengthen worker decision making. The Build a Strong Workforce (Workforce) strategy aims to address workforce stability and competence, bringing both human resources (HR) and child welfare staff to the table to improve hiring practices. The Strengthen System Decision Making (SDM) strategy aims to develop a system feedback mechanism that combines quantitative data measures with qualitative case review data to observe patterns, identify issues and create data-informed solutions to improve practice. The Strengthen Worker Decision Making (WDM) strategy focuses on understanding how frontline decisions are made and implementing strategies to support and improve them. To test the OTF concept, Casey invited three public child welfare agencies to implement the three concurrent strategies, which they began in January 2015. Two agencies, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and Jefferson County, Colorado, sustained these efforts and are the focus of this implementation evaluation report.

The evaluation report is organized into four chapters. Chapter 1 reviews the conceptual development, goals and theory of change for the OTF initiative. Chapter 2 describes the evaluation design and methods. Chapter 3 presents evaluation findings regarding the implementation, outputs and outcomes of the OTF initiative. Chapter 4 discusses cross-cutting findings, limitations of findings and recommendations for future OTF implementation efforts.

1.1 Conceptual Development

Prior to the OTF initiative, Casey recognized that they were doing very little to build knowledge of front-end child welfare practices. They directed many of their resources toward back-end initiatives that focused on foster care prevention and exits to permanency. One Casey informant said that front-end work is *an area that's been very problematic in child welfare and the Foundation's work in child welfare before OTF had been focused primarily on the out-of-home care side, not on the investigative side.* They believed

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they needed to focus some of their work on understanding front-end practices so they could improve them. One Casey informant articulated it this way:

> *"There was very little being done in public child welfare in academia or in the foundation world to support the front end of the child welfare system. That, I came to believe…, was primarily because there was a lack of understanding of the very difficult details of the work and that people…simply didn't…have a sense of what could be done to deal with the continuing crises all around the country in public child welfare related to the inadequacies of our interventions with families to actually protect children."*

Casey began planning by identifying three challenges perpetuating problems at the front end.

The first challenge was stability of the child welfare workforce – specifically, the chronic problem of retaining frontline caseworkers in child protection. Child protection positions were some of the most challenging to fill and retain because of the fast pace, crisis-driven nature of the work. Agencies often struggled to identify enough candidates, let alone the right candidates, for the job. Consequently, front-end child protection jobs *"tend to be the jobs that are given to our newest and often youngest staff. The turnover is very high and the vacancy rates are bad"* (Casey informant).

The second challenge was decision-making inconsistency. There did not seem to be a systematic way to go about making case decisions and so the process was unclear. The subjective experience and/or opinion of the frontline caseworker and his/her supervisor appeared to dictate case decisions at all stages – screening, assignment, disposition and closure. Consequently, it was *"not clear…that we removed the children who needed to be removed or that we protected the children who needed to be protected"* (Casey informant).

The final challenge was the lack of a system feedback mechanism or a systematic process to use existing agency data to improve case practice and clarify policy. One Casey informant recalled, *"I discovered in my former agency that in some field offices 40 percent of the investigations…we came to believe that abuse or neglect had in fact occurred…were closed without any involvement."* Agencies had a limited ability to track and understand aggregate characteristics of cases and the critical factors leading to re-referrals. Moreover, they lacked a systematic way to determine if the interventions they used aligned appropriately to reduce future incidents of maltreatment. One Casey informant described it this way: *"The remainder of founded investigations were kept open and often were provided with preventive services, so-called. It was really intervention that we had no clear sense, no evidence at all, that it was actually helping those families and protecting those children."* Therefore, the informant believed that the *"use of data from the frontline, some of it*

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very simple to gather, some of it not,…would give us a better chance to change the system because we're learning what's working and what's not." The Casey OTF designers (OTF designers) believed that the challenges could be addressed by focusing on workforce stability, worker decision-making practices and system decision-making capabilities.

1.2   Goals

OTF goals included strengthening front-end practices and ultimately improving child safety. One Casey informant put it this way: *"The ultimate goal is the front door and the beginning of a family's involvement with a system at the investigation stage. If you do not pay attention to that, and that is not done well and competently, you see the problems in the system later on."* The OTF initiative focused on implementation of three concurrent strategies to accomplish the goals.

Build a Strong Workforce. The Workforce strategy aims to address workforce stability and competence. One issue in many jurisdictions is that hiring decisions are driven by a standard qualifying exam used to hire all government positions (e.g., civil service system) rather than specific competencies needed for a child welfare position. Another complicating factor is that the hiring process is highly dependent on the jurisdiction's HR department to identify desirable candidates rather than the child welfare agency specifically. One Casey informant described it this way: "*Workforce is a perennial headache in child welfare. And again, it's been hard to crack that nut because systems vary so greatly. They probably vary a lot more in their human resource infrastructure than in any of the practice areas.*" The Workforce strategy focuses on developing methods to change current hiring practices by ensuring that both HR and child welfare staff are at the table. The OTF designers believed this would lead to better job candidates and hires (those with the competencies needed for specific positions), which, in turn, would lead to a more competent – and stable – workforce.

Strengthen System Decision Making. The SDM strategy aims to develop system-wide techniques to facilitate data-driven accountability and quality improvement processes. The objective is to combine quantitative data with qualitative case review data to observe patterns, identify issues and create data-informed solutions. One Casey informant described it as *"an opportunity to test a fairly fresh concept and see if it couldn't bring to our sites an improved way of looking jointly at data about performance on key child welfare measures using a snapshot through individual cases, or individual units…that illustrated the big pictures we were seeing through data."* The OTF designers theorized that SDM, if implemented properly, would

eventually enhance agency and managerial capacity to identify and respond to "systemic barriers affecting frontline work" (AECF, 2017).

Strengthen Worker Decision Making. The WDM strategy focuses on understanding how frontline decisions are made and implementing strategies to support and improve them. One Casey informant reflected, *"it is always the big mystery is how do people go about making these decisions, especially when they're…without…a lot of training or skills and they're making, basically, life and death decisions about kids. So it's a really critical area."* The OTF designers had ideas about specific approaches, but nothing was fully developed. They considered building on Casey's Team Decision Making (TDM) model. TDM is *"a tool to help agencies make better early intervention or removal decisions because it involved more people than worker and supervisor...and avoided the pitfalls of particular supervisor and her team of workers who might remove twice or three times as often based on supervisor's opinion, not on agency policy"* (Casey informant). They believed that embedding teaming of decisions in front-end stages (e.g., screening, case assignment and disposition) would lead to improved overall decision making.

They considered constructing a process to cultivate sound judgment using intuition, which builds off experience. Casey's work with experts in the field of decision science (Gary Klein, Laura Militello and Eileen Munro) in 2011 led to this idea (AECF, 2012). One Casey informant described it as, "*We [the child welfare system] are not hiring people who have any ability to use intuition because they have no experience."* The OTF designers worked with experts in decision science to develop ShadowBox. *"ShadowBox is a simulation that builds expertise by exposing workers to a range of situations through case studies or videos. It is an exercise that allows caseworkers to look individually at case scenarios, and really break down their analysis, their assessment and decision-making processes"* (Casey informant). Thus, even though the OTF developers did not have a clearly defined WDM strategy, they had a basic sketch of what might work. *"The basic idea was to target all areas at the front end of the system where workers or their frontline supervisors are in a position to assess and decide"* (Casey informant). The overall objective was to enable frontline caseworkers to be *"consistent, equitable, values driven, timely and informed by all available data"* (AECF, 2017).

1.3   OTF Theory of Change

According to the designers, the theory behind Casey's OTF initiative is that three concurrent strategies—build a strong workforce, strengthen worker decision making and strengthen system decision making—work together to improve workforce stability, workloads, decision-making quality

and other outputs to achieve improvements in child safety. Exhibit 1 presents the logic model for the OTF initiative, which illustrates this theory in the **orange** boxes. The model also incorporates the resources theorized to make this work possible (**green** box) and contextual factors (**burgundy** bar) that may influence the implementation process and outcomes.

Exhibit 1.   Logic Model for the On the Frontline Initiative[1]

GOAL: Implementing three key strategies will improve child safety

Resources

Annie E. Casey TA Consultants and Resources

Site Leadership and Resources

Stakeholders

Implement OTF Key Strategies

1. **Build a strong workforce** Recruitment, selection, hiring; competency-focused; strengthen supervision and coaching; manage hiring needs with data

2. **Strengthen system decision making** System feedback mechanism, track outcome measures

3. **Strengthen worker decision making** Actionable data; manageable, equitable workloads; supervisory model; pre-removal team meetings; ShadowBox

Improve Outputs

- Vacancy rates, workforce stability and worker competence

- Understanding of…
  - barriers by leaders
  - policies by staff
  - connection between front-end practice and permanency

- Workloads
- Timely face-to-face contact and timely decision making
- Decision-making quality and consistency

Improve Child Safety

Improve decision making to improve child safety

Decrease:
- Repeat reports
- Repeat maltreatment

Contextual Factors and Child Protection Referral Population influence inputs, outputs and outcomes

To test the OTF concept, Casey invited three public child welfare agencies to implement the three concurrent strategies. The goal was to determine if together these strategies resulted in improvements in front-end practices. Casey was interested in understanding whether these strategies were enough to turn around outcomes and make systems more successful. Casey selected the three agencies at the end of 2014, and in January 2015 the sites began implementing the OTF strategies. Two agencies, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and Jefferson County, Colorado, sustained these efforts and are the focus of this retrospective implementation evaluation. The third, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, withdrew from the initiative in November 2016 because they wanted to focus on the Workforce strategy exclusively. The remaining chapters describe the implementation evaluation methods, findings and recommendations.

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[1] Exhibit 1 presents the logic model guiding the evaluation. The evaluation team incorporated the original concepts from the original Casey logic model in the orange boxes, modifying the organization somewhat, and added Resources and the role of Contextual Factors (see AECF, 2017 for original).

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2.   Evaluation Design and Methods

The evaluation team conducted a retrospective mixed methods implementation evaluation of the OTF initiative. The objective was to test the theory that three concurrent strategies – build a strong workforce, strengthen worker decision making and strengthen system decision making – work together to improve decision-making practices, and ultimately improve child safety. This chapter describes the seven questions guiding the evaluation (Section 2.1) and the design and methods (Section 2.2).

2.1   Evaluation Questions

The OTF evaluation examined conceptual linkages between activities (e.g., workforce hiring activities) and outputs (e.g., vacancy rates and turnover) in the initiative logic model and also tested the relationship to child safety. The following seven questions guided the evaluation:

1.   What was the process of site selection?

2.   How do stakeholders define the OTF purpose, goals and key activities?

3.   Was the OTF initiative implemented as intended?

4.   What aspects of implementation have gone well? What have been the barriers?

5.   What results were observed in expected OTF outputs?

6.   Are there signs of an emerging shift toward improvement in child safety outcomes?

7.   What are the key lessons learned and recommendations?

2.2   Mixed Methods Retrospective Evaluation Design

This section briefly summarizes the evaluation design and methods. Appendices provide more detail and are referenced as relevant. To answer these questions, we developed and implemented a retrospective, mixed methods evaluation design (see Exhibit 2). Institutional review board approval was obtained for evaluation plans, protocols and consent forms to ensure protection for participating respondents.

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Exhibit 2.   Evaluation Design Overview: Mixed Methods Retrospective Study

Qualitative Study		+	Quantitative Study			Synthesis and Reporting
Data Collection	Qualitative Analysis → Qualitative Findings		Data Collection	Quantitative Analysis → Quantitative Findings		Overall Findings and Interpretation

• Focus groups • Interviews • Document review • Thematic analysis and coding • Triangulate data sources • Concepts for survey • Present and discuss	• Surveys • Descriptive data and group comparisons • Scale reliability • Administrative data indicators • Interrupted time series • Graphs • Present and discuss	Triangulate findings Present and discuss **Final Report** Key findings, Lessons learned, Recommendations

For the qualitative study (see Appendix A), we conducted document review, interviews and focus groups. First, we completed an extensive review of more than 120 documents pertaining to OTF development, site selection, convenings and steering committee operations and work groups. Next we interviewed current and former Casey leaders and consultants (Casey informants), as well as child welfare leaders in each site. We also facilitated a series of focus groups at each site with staff involved in the OTF work groups and with supervisors and caseworkers not involved in OTF work groups (agency participants). After completing data collection, we transcribed results and developed a coding scheme to conduct thematic analysis (see Appendix A). We presented and discussed the initial qualitative findings with Casey (September 27, 2018) and the child welfare leader in each site (October 10 and 24, 2018), gaining their insights to inform continued analysis and interpretation of the data. We also used qualitative results to identify concepts to include in surveys that were conducted in the two sites, Cuyahoga County and Jefferson County.

The quantitative study consisted of an anonymous, self-administered, web-based survey in each site (see Appendix B) and analysis of quarterly administrative data compiled during OTF implementation (see Appendix C). The web survey was distributed to a more expansive group of agency staff in each site to gain a more representative view of OTF implementation activities (e.g., supervision) and expected outputs (e.g., workload), beyond the view of qualitative participants. We conducted a descriptive analysis of survey data (e.g., frequencies) and examined differences between participants hired before and after OTF implementation.

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For quarterly administrative data, we conducted interrupted time series (ITS) analysis to assess whether trends in the indicators changed once the OTF intervention was introduced (see Appendix C). Most ITS analyses focused on trends in expected outputs (e.g., workload, vacancies), and several explored child safety. Although child safety was OTF's ultimate goal, analysis of the relationship between OTF and child safety was exploratory, and we did not expect significant findings, for two reasons. First, implementation of OTF was formative (in its early stages) and, second, we expect that child safety would take more than a few years to change. As such, if OTF does influence child safety, as theorized, it would require long-term and consistent implementation to do so.

We presented and discussed quantitative findings with Casey (December 13, 2018) and the child welfare leader in each site (December 18, 2018, January 3, 2019). Afterwards, we triangulated data across sources and synthesized findings to provide a complete picture. We presented the comprehensive evaluation findings to Casey and child welfare leaders from both sites (January 8, 2019) to gain insight into the interpretation of findings and to ensure accuracy.

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3.   Evaluation Findings

Chapter 3 presents findings from the mixed methods evaluation of the OTF initiative. The first section summarizes the site selection process and criteria (Section 3.1), stakeholder expectations (Section 3.2) and resources for the initiative (Section 3.3). The next section presents findings regarding the implementation of each OTF strategy: Workforce (Section 3.4), SDM (Section 3.5), and WDM (Section 3.6). The following section examines exploratory analysis of safety data (Section 3.7). The final section concludes with site perspectives of successes, challenges and lessons learned (Section 3.8).

3.1   Site Selection

Process. In 2014, Casey set out to identify suitable sites to test the OTF initiative. They conducted a nationwide webinar that shared the background and purpose of the initiative to cultivate interest. Casey sent the announcement to state child welfare directors who then disseminated it to their jurisdictions. At the conclusion of the webinar, those expressing interest were asked to send a letter to Casey. From these, Casey asked four jurisdictions to submit applications. The Casey OTF selection committee members reviewed the applications, conducted on-site interviews and presented the information to the entire OTF committee for final consensus on site selection.

Criteria. Casey's OTF selection committee considered several criteria when making their final decision. First, agency leadership in potential sites needed to demonstrate autonomy to make key decisions to move OTF activities forward. As one Casey informant described it, *"we also needed to have some sense in leadership that there was clear control – there was the ability to control what happened in the agency."* Second, the agency's needs had to be congruent with what the OTF initiative was offering, and the agency needed to be in a reasonable position to do the work. For example, to achieve manageable workloads an agency needed to have *"caseloads that were already at least reasonable according to the field"* even if they were still too high (Casey informant). Third, the agency needed a demonstrated capacity to do the work, as evidenced by a history of implementing other initiatives, and had to be known to Casey even if only peripherally. Finally, the OTF committee determined that an entire state system would be too complex for the initial testing of the OTF initiative so three county-based sites were selected: Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; Cuyahoga County, Ohio; and Jefferson County, Colorado.

Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties were well-known to Casey and had been a part of other Foundation initiatives. In Allegheny County, which was not as well-known to Casey, *"there were a lot of good things going on there"* so it was believed they had the internal capacity to do the work (Casey informant). All three sites started OTF implementation in January 2015, but only two sites – Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties – completed the initiative in June 2018 and are the focus of this evaluation.

3.2　Stakeholder Expectations

This section describes the views of agency stakeholders regarding the perceived goals and expected benefits of the OTF initiative. At the start of all qualitative data collection activities, the evaluation team asked each interviewee and focus group member an open-ended question about their understanding of the initiative's goals and expected benefits. Participants in both sites had similar responses to goals and expected benefits, suggesting that they understood these to be inseparable. Their expectations were relevant to each of the three OTF strategies and included improvements in services and child safety. The following sections discuss the site-specific findings.

In Cuyahoga County, participants' expectations aligned with the three strategies and included service and safety outcomes (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3.　　Cuyahoga County Perceived Goals and Expected Benefits

Build Stronger Workforce	Strengthen Worker Decision Making	Strengthen System Decision Making	Outcomes
• Improve hiring • Stabilize workforce • Improve training	• Improve critical thinking & decision making • Develop & improve frontline practice & skills • Decrease caseloads	• System/agency decision making • Identify/overcome systemic barriers • Improve agency	• Improve child/family services • Child safety

Workforce findings consisted of improving hiring, stabilizing the workforce and improving training. Participants noted that they were expecting *"better candidates"* and *"keeping ourselves staffed."* WDM findings included enhancing critical thinking and decision making, developing and improving frontline practice and skills, and decreasing caseloads. One participant summed it up by expressing

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that caseworkers would be *"more confident in their decision making."* SDM findings consisted of system/agency decision making, identifying and overcoming systemic barriers and improving the agency. They expected to *"improve practice through system decision making and ChildStat"* and an agency process of *"self-discovery."* Participants also believed that OTF goals would enhance child and family services and child safety.

Jefferson County participants held similar views of OTF goals and expected benefits (see Exhibit 4). Workforce findings consisted of building and improving the workforce, stabilizing the workforce and improving recruitment and hiring. WDM findings included improving/strengthening decision making, developing/improving frontline practice/skills and strengthening supervision and coaching. Participants said, *"our key motivators were our workforce and our turnover"* and *"improving some of the decision making and critical thinking through the coaching and the supervision."* SDM findings consisted of improving system/agency decision making and agency-wide consistency. Participants also shared OTF expectations beyond the three strategies. These included staff satisfaction and organizational health, staff engagement and empowerment and improvements in child and family services and outcomes.

Exhibit 4.   Jefferson County Perceived Goals and Expected Benefits

Build Stronger Workforce	Strengthen Worker Decision Making	Strengthen System Decision Making	Added Work stream & Outcomes
• Build/improve workforce • Stabilize workforce • Recruitment/hiring	• Improve/ strengthen decision making • Develop/improve frontline practice/skills • Supervision/ coaching	• System/agency decision making • Improve agency • Consistency	• Staff satisfaction/org. health • Staff engagement/ empowerment • Improve child/family services & outcomes

3.3   Resources for OTF Implementation

Participants from both sites reported that they had extensive agency and Casey resources available to champion the work (see Exhibit 5). Casey technical assistance (TA) consultants provided the structure and support to form a steering committee and establish work groups to implement the three OTF strategies. Work groups included staff across programs (e.g., HR, intake/short-term

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services, permanency/extended services, information technology) and at all levels (e.g., frontline caseworker, supervisors, managers, child welfare director) of the agency. Each work group developed a work plan and began implementing activities for each strategy (i.e., work streams), guided by Casey TA consultants with HR, child welfare and data expertise. Sections 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6 present findings about the activities and outputs relevant to each work stream.

Exhibit 5.   Resources for Implementation
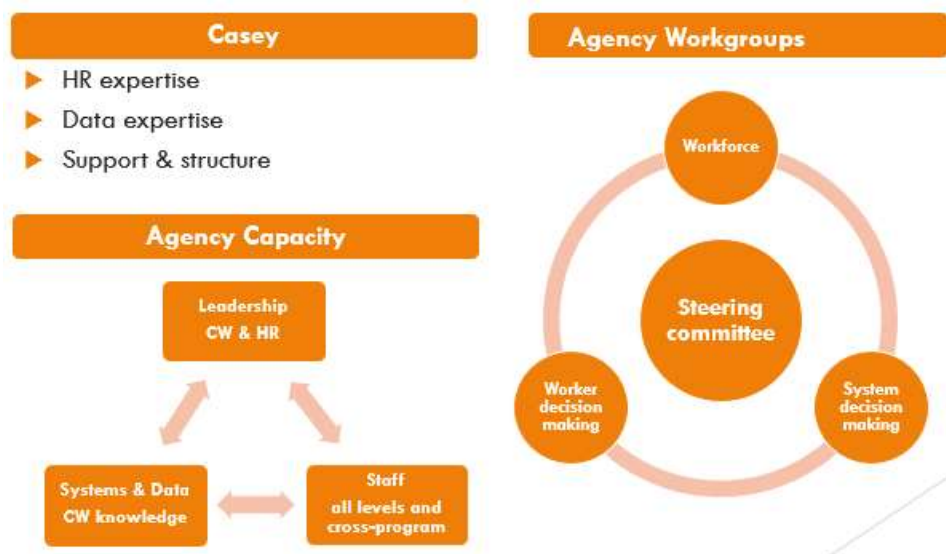
3.4   Build a Strong Workforce Work Stream Activities and Outputs

The Workforce strategy aimed to address workforce stability and competence. Work stream implementation activities included efforts to expand recruitment, target staff selection and hiring, build a competency-focused development program, strengthen supervision and coaching and manage with data (see Exhibit 1 Logic Model). OTF designers expected that these activities would lead to improvements in vacancy rates, workforce stability and worker competence. This section describes the Workforce work stream activities and outputs observed in each site.

Cuyahoga County Activities. Exhibit 6 illustrates OTF Workforce activities implemented in Cuyahoga County, as well as the expected and observed outputs. The agency used vacancy and turnover data to predict hiring needs and inform work stream activities. Supported by these data, the agency began "*anticipatory hiring,*" continually posting job positions, hiring for positions before they

became vacant and training these new staff so they were ready to fill a position as they became vacant: "*So we were allowed to hire up to 16 extra people that their positions didn't exist for because we knew our turnover rate. So we did a lot of work with [the TA consultant] and figured out what our turnover rate was, at what rate were we losing staff so then we were able to sort of keep up with it.*" The agency revised job postings and attached a realistic job preview.

Exhibit 6.   Cuyahoga County Observed Implementation Activities and Outputs: Workforce

Activities Implemented	Expected Outputs	Observed Outputs
• Vacancy and turnover data to predict hiring needs • Pre-vacancy positions • Continual job posting • Realistic job preview • Behavioral competencies, behavioral-based interviews • Team-based approach	• Decrease vacancy rates • Improve workforce stability (decrease turnover, increase worker-client consistency) • Increase worker competence	• Vacancy rates decreased (Q, A) • Perception of decreased time to fill positions (Q) • Turnover is low; no change (Q, A) • Hiring is now conducted by teams (Q,S) • Hiring is now focused on competencies (Q)

Note: Q, A and S in Observed Outputs indicate that the outputs were observed in (Q) qualitative data, (A) administrative data analysis or (S) survey data. Findings were congruent across data sources.

The Workforce activities changed the interview process by developing new interview questions, focusing on behavioral competencies and interviewing candidates in teams. The agency developed interview questions to learn what applicants knew about the work and discuss the realities of the job. There was "*time invested, the really trying to say I want you to understand what you're getting yourself*" into. With guidance from TA consultants, the agency identified and defined behavioral competencies needed to perform the job (Exhibit 7), developed interview questions to assess applicant competencies and trained supervisors to conduct behavioral-based interviewing, which they began conducting midway through implementation

Exhibit 7.   Behavioral Competencies: Cuyahoga County

Caseworkers	Supervisors
1. Adaptability	1. Adaptability and Facilitating Change
2. Building Trust	2. Building Trust
3. Communication	3. Client/Family Focus
4. Conflict Management	4. Collaboration
5. Continuous Learning	5. Communication
6. Cultural Competence and Inclusivity	6. Continuous Learning
7. Client/Family Focus	7. Cultural Competence and Inclusivity
8. Decision Making/Problem Solving	8. Decision Making/Problem Solving
9. Facilitating Change	9. Guiding and Developing Staff
10. Planning and Organizing	10. Initiative
11. Stress Tolerance	11. Managing Work
12. Teamwork/Collaboration	12. Team Leadership
13. Technical Professional Skills	
14. Work Standards	

(July 2016). Interviews became more of a discussion "*to engage them in dialogue about their thinking.*" The agency also implemented a team approach to hiring, with a senior manager and supervisor

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interviewing together; as one agency participant noted, the "*interview team helps with consensus and consistency.*" Participants generally felt positive about behavioral-based interviewing and the team approach to hiring but also noted challenges. One agency participant summarized, *"My experience was both, we come to a consensus, and other times they [chiefs] make decision themselves…. And then they were gone [staff leave]."* Even with the challenges, survey results showed that those involved in the hiring process tended to feel confident in their ability to conduct these interviews and believed they helped the agency hire the right people (2.0, 2.7 out of 5.0, see Appendix B.2 for interpretation of mean scores).

Cuyahoga County Outputs. Regarding outputs, administrative data show that vacancy rates fluctuated but, overall, trended down during the implementation period (Exhibit 8).[2] This was consistent with the qualitative data: *"At one point, we had no vacancies… we now are back to having some vacancies, but we're better off now than we were three years ago."* Participants also noted that the time to fill positions decreased: "*We did shorten that nine-month*

Exhibit 8. Cuyahoga County Caseworker Vacancy Rate: Social Services Workers 3 (descriptive data)

atrocious timeframe of hiring." Regarding turnover, Cuyahoga County's administrative data showed that external turnover rates were low throughout the implementation period, between 2 and 4 percent, with no significant change over time; qualitative data confirmed this finding, with this agency's participants also reporting low turnover. Despite low turnover, there were contradictory survey results regarding participants' intentions to leave the job. For example, over half of survey respondents (57%) reported looking for a job in the past year and more than half (60%) reported planning to seek new employment in the next year. Respondents tended to disagree (3.8 out of 5.0) that the agency works to retain qualified staff. When asked what would motivate them to leave, respondents reported work-related stress or burnout was the first most common reason (75%) and lack of appreciation (57%) was the second.[3]

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[2] Baseline data were not available; we cannot observe whether the decrease represents a change or continues a prior trend.

[3] The timing of the survey may contribute to these responses, as the agency had recently experienced a tragedy, a child fatality, and several staff lost their jobs related to this.

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Worker competencies were not measured over time. However, in the qualitative data a theme emerged around behavioral-based interviewing, in particular that it would lead to hiring more competent staff: *"I think the competencies…are going to be a key piece of us picking the right people, developing the right skill sets and then preparing them for promotions."* Survey responses supported this: on average (2.7 out of 5.0), staff agreed that behavioral-based interviewing helps the agency hire the right people.

Jefferson County Activities. Exhibit 9 demonstrates OTF Workforce activities implemented in Jefferson County, as well as the expected and observed outputs. Although all three work stream activities began at the same time, agency leadership prioritized the Workforce work stream. The agency developed an automated Position Tracking report, combining data from HR and child welfare to track vacancies, time to fill a position and turnover on a quarterly basis. The agency used these data to predict hiring needs for intake and permanency units. In an effort to reduce time to fill positions and to reduce vacancies, Jefferson County instituted continual job postings and created pre-vacancy positions to hire and train staff prior to a vacancy, so they were prepared to take on caseloads when vacancies occurred.

Exhibit 9. Jefferson County Observed Implementation Activities and Outputs: Workforce

Activities Implemented	Expected Outputs	Observed Outputs
• Position Tracking report to predict hiring needs • Pre-vacancy positions • Continual job posting • Realistic job preview • Pre-screening • Behavioral competencies, behavioral-based interviews • Team-based approach	• Decrease vacancy rates • Improve workforce stability (decrease turnover, increase worker-client consistency) • Increase worker competence	• Vacancy rates decreased (Q, A*) • Time to fill positions decreased (Q, A*) • Turnover decreased (A*) (Q<>) • Hiring is now conducted by teams (Q,S) • Hiring is now focused on competencies (Q)

Note: Q, A and S indicate that the outputs were observed in (Q) qualitative data, (A) administrative data analysis or (S) survey data. A* indicates that a change in the output was associated with OTF in the ITS analysis. Findings were congruent across data sources for most indicators. However, Q<> indicates a difference; qualitatively, turnover was perceived to be about the same by some, whereas administrative data provided evidence of a small decrease in turnover.

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Jefferson County also revamped their hiring process. The Workforce work group developed a series of tools to guide the hiring process (Exhibit 10), incorporated a realistic job preview in their new job posting and comprehensive application, added a phone screening prior to the in-person interview, developed behavioral competencies and behavioral-based interviews and instituted a team-based approach to interviewing. The agency developed a job posting that provides a specific, realistic description of duties, and they created a video

Exhibit 10.   Jefferson County Tools to Guide the Hiring Process

1. Checklists for phone screening, in-person interview, background check, onboarding and documentation
2. Steps to coordinate the hiring roles
3. Email templates for scheduling interviews and requesting background information
4. Prescreen questions for phone screening
5. Interview guide
6. Interview assessment forms
7. Behavioral competencies descriptions

to convey the realities of the position. Applicants are asked to react to the video as part of the comprehensive application. The phone screening asks about the applicant's interest in the position, describes realistic aspects of the job and asks applicants for their thoughts about and comfort level with these; for example, the interviewers describe unpredictable irregular hours, varying job functions, and expectations to drive throughout the metro area and sometimes the state, and they discuss thoughts around making safety decisions.

With guidance from TA consultants, the agency identified and defined behavioral competencies necessary to be a successful child welfare frontline caseworker (Exhibit 11) and designed interview questions and assessment forms to evaluate for them. Each interviewer rates the applicant's proficiency in specific competencies, and the interview team discusses and makes a recommendation about whether to move forward in the hiring process. One agency participant reflected, *"We are looking for people that have those competencies that we find to be for successful caseworkers."*

Exhibit 11.   Behavioral Competencies: Jefferson County

Caseworkers	Supervisors
1. Adaptability and Facilitating Change	1. Coaching
2. Building Trust	2. Collaboration
3. Collaboration	3. Communication
4. Communication	4. Continuous Learning
5. Conflict Management	5. Customer/Client Focus
6. Customer/Client Focus	6. Decision Making/Problem Solving
7. Decision Making/Problem Solving	7. Facilitating Change
8. Inclusivity	8. Guiding and Developing Staff
9. Influence	9. Inclusivity
10. Initiative	10. Initiative
11. Planning and Organizing	11. Managing Work
12. Safety Focus	12. Safety Focus
13. Stress Tolerance	13. Stress Tolerance
	14. Team Leadership

Overall staff felt positive about the hiring process, "*a really good way of doing hiring through the behavioral-based interviewing.*" According to the survey, staff felt confident in their ability to conduct these interviews and believed it helped the

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agency hire the right people (1.8, 2.1 out of 5.0, see Appendix B.3 for interpretation of mean scores). The agency also implemented a team-based approach to hiring, "*instead of supervisors hiring their own people.*" Each month two supervisors and two caseworkers are assigned to hire for all intake and permanency caseworker positions. Participants indicated that this approach led to a more diverse workforce, *"and it's made a big difference. We're a pretty white community, but we actually have more diverse ethnicities than we used to. And we have more men, which is really great."*

Jefferson County Outputs. Results from the ITS analysis (see Appendix C) show that vacancy rates improved once OTF began. As illustrated in Exhibit 12, the OTF initiative was associated with an estimated 5.7 percent decrease in vacancy rates. OTF also was associated with a decrease in time to fill a position (43 days fewer, on average). At baseline, positions took well over two months to fill, whereas during OTF positions were filled in just over a month, on average. OTF was also associated with improvement in turnover; as illustrated in Exhibit 13, turnover was increasing during baseline, but began to decrease once OTF was implemented.

Exhibit 12. Jefferson County Intake Caseworker Vacancy Rate Before and After On the Frontline Began: Interrupted Time Series Fit Line
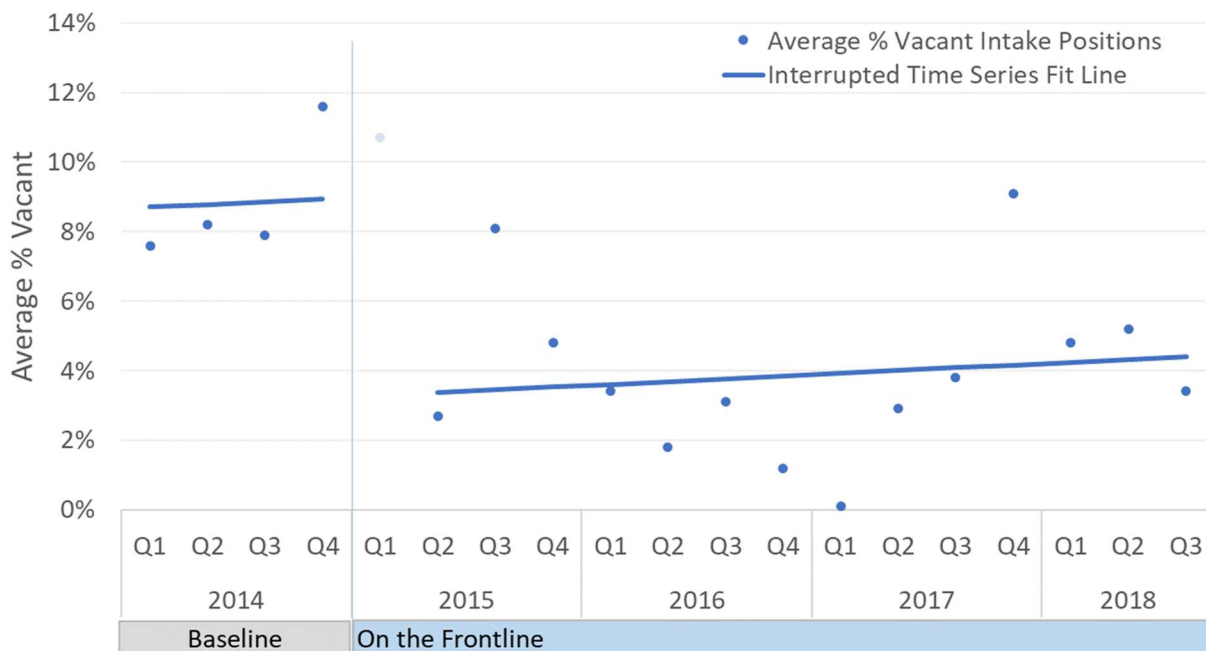
Exhibit 13. Jefferson County Intake Caseworker Turnover Rates Before and After On the Frontline Began: Interrupted Time Series Fit Line
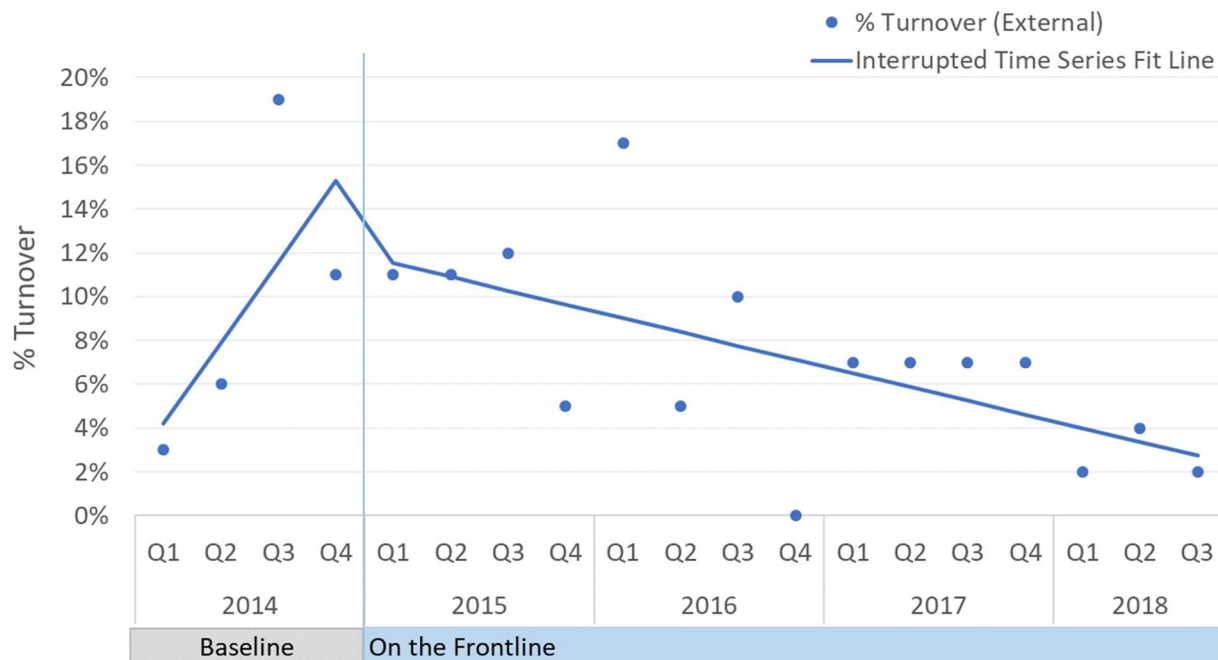
Findings from focus groups and interviews were mostly consistent with administrative data. With regard to vacancies, some noted progress, *"looking back at 2015 to now, it's much better."* However, another acknowledged some *"bumps"* but said *"overall it's been positive that we're hiring people quicker, we're getting them trained quicker, it decreases the workload that people have to fill in when people leave, so I think that's been a huge, huge thing that's kind of helped."* Regarding turnover, some reported progress while others perceived no improvement. Participants noted, *"there's still that turnover but I think it is more consistently filled"* and *"I don't know that we've necessarily totally seen what we wanted, but I think we're getting there."* One participant attributed progress to caseworker involvement in the initiative: *"Things have been a little bit better since they've had the committee, the hiring committee with supervisors and caseworkers, and I – because I think our opinions are valuable. We're the ones that are out on the field on the front line, constantly…. Having caseworkers in there is extremely valuable."* Regarding intentions to leave the agency, close to half of survey participants (48%) had looked for a job in the past year. Salary (66%) and work-related stress or burnout (45%) were the top two reasons selected for motivations to leave.

Worker competencies were not measured over time. However, qualitative data showed that hiring teams focused on competencies when interviewing applicants. Survey responses confirm that, on average, the agency does a good job recruiting and hiring qualified people and that behavioral-based

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interviewing helps the agency hire the right people (2.3, 2.1 out of 5.0). One agency participant summarized it this way: *"[The OTF Workforce] significantly helped with our retention and our turnover.... There's nothing that I'm not proud of about work stream one [Workforce]."*

Summary of Workforce Results. The Workforce work stream was clearly defined in both sites, with prescribed activities guided by TA consultants with expertise in child welfare and HR. The sites engaged in similar processes to implement this work stream. Each formed a Workforce work group, with TA consultants providing structure and expertise to guide the work. Both sites included all levels of agency staff and involved HR staff, which agency participants viewed as critical to the success of the work stream. Both sites used data to predict hiring needs and revised their hiring process in an effort to hire better qualified staff more quickly. They added pre-vacancy positions, continual job postings and realistic job previews and implemented a team-based approach to the interview process, together assessing behavioral-based competencies to do the job (see Exhibit 14).

Exhibit 14.   Workforce Activities and Outputs Observed Across Sites
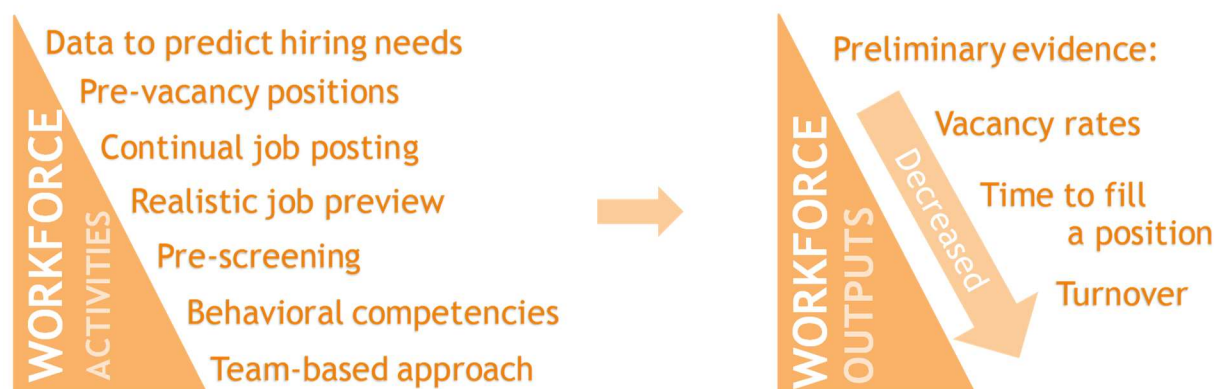
The sites differed in that Jefferson County developed an automated position tracking report to predict hiring needs, whereas Cuyahoga County used data to predict the expected vacancy rate but is still developing an automated report. In Cuyahoga County, the team-based hiring approach engaged supervisors and managers in hiring teams, whereas Jefferson County engaged supervisors and caseworkers in the hiring teams, emphasizing the importance of the caseworker's voice. Both sites noted challenges in implementation, and at the same time felt positive about the work stream.

Based on various data sources, there was preliminary evidence of decreases in vacancy rates, time to fill a position and, in one site, turnover. Vacancy rates decreased in both sites. The strongest evidence comes from Jefferson County, which had baseline data and where improvements were

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associated with the OTF initiative in ITS analysis (although no causal connection can be made). Furthermore, time to fill positions decreased, as evidenced by administrative data in Jefferson County and qualitative data from both sites. There was also some preliminary evidence of some reduction in external turnover in Jefferson County, based on administrative data. However, staff perceptions of turnover varied, and Cuyahoga County's data showed consistently low turnover rates.

3.5 Strengthen System Decision Making Work Stream Activities and Outputs

The SDM strategy aimed to develop system-wide techniques to facilitate data-driven accountability and quality improvement processes. The objective was to combine quantitative data with qualitative case review data to observe patterns, identify issues and create data-informed solutions. The work stream included two key activities to meet this objective: (1) review, set and track outcome measures to improve agency practice and performance and (2) develop a system feedback mechanism. The OTF designers theorized that implementation of these activities would lead to an increased awareness of the connection between front-end practice and permanency and an improved understanding of barriers by leaders and would support the development of tracking measures for the other work stream outputs that support agency practice (see Exhibit 15). Both sites successfully implemented SDM work stream activities and achieved site-specific outputs. The following sections describe the SDM activities in more detail and then discuss each site's findings.

Exhibit 15.   Implementation of Strengthen System Decision Making Work Stream

Overview of SDM Work Stream Activities. The first activity – review, set and track outcome measures to improve agency practice and performance – included reviewing existing agency

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managerial reports and establishing and/or revising measures in order to monitor key agency performance outcomes. The purpose (expected output) was to increase agency-wide awareness of the connection between front-end practice and permanency for children and youth.

The second activity – develop system feedback mechanism – was guided by the ChildStat model, originally implemented in New York City. ChildStat is a managerial process to identify and improve leaders' understanding of practice issues and barriers, to facilitate a "real-time" system feedback method to address them.

In the ChildStat process, the agency selects a Child Protective Services agency office and randomly pulls a case to represent a practice challenge evident in aggregate data. A complete written history about the case is compiled for presentation at the ChildStat session. The audience for the session includes frontline supervisors, direct managers and agency leadership, including the agency director. The session starts with a review of aggregate data from the selected agency office that may include a focus on workload size, time to case completion or other indicators, followed by a discussion about the data. Next, the selected manager and frontline supervisor present the identified case within the context of agency policies and practices. Then they discuss case-specific practices and highlight strengths and barriers. This is followed by an interactive question and answer session with agency leadership. The intent is to facilitate honest discussion for *"teaching purposes."*

> *"The ChildStat model allows for two-way feedback between frontline workers and managers and agency leadership. It is crucial for agency leaders to hear directly from child protection staff about their cases, and families, supports, challenges, how conducting casework and how they are carrying out agency policies. It is just as critical for frontline staff to hear from agency leaders in a non-punitive way about improved case practices, Child Protection Services trends based on data and appropriate use of policy"* (AECF OTF webinar, 2014).

As part of SDM, each site was asked to consider the ChildStat model for their system feedback mechanism, but it was not required. Sites had the flexibility to adopt a model they could implement and sustain. As one Casey informant conveyed, *"So we were open to variations on the New York City-style ChildStat, but those basic concepts of doing the big, inclusive, transparent conversation, and doing it very regularly, and having your leaders up front, that was all part of our vision for how that might help us to better understand what goes on at the front end of the system, and continually making improvements to it."* Each site went about implementing the SDM activities and tailored them to their unique agency context.

Cuyahoga County Activities and Outputs. For the first SDM activity – review, set and track outcome measures to improve agency practice and performance – Cuyahoga County developed and produced quarterly administrative data reports with more than 12 indicators designed to measure and track agency performance on eight OTF outputs and child safety (see Exhibit 16 for outputs tracked; see Appendix C for indicators).

Exhibit 16.   Outputs Tracked in Cuyahoga County

1. Vacancy rates
2. Turnover rates
3. Timely face-to-face contact with child
4. Timely decision making
5. Decision-making consistency
6. Decision-making quality
7. Improved understanding of policies by staff
8. Child safety

Some of these were more straightforward to measure (e.g., vacancy rates, turnover rates, timely face-to-face contact with child) and the results are discussed in the relevant work stream (see Sections 3.4 and 3.6). Conversely, some concepts were more complex and more difficult to measure (e.g., decision-making quality, understanding of policies), and sometimes indicators measured just one aspect of the output. For example, one administrative indicator measures the percentage of cases in which an initial custody team decision meeting was held within the specified timeframe. Although the indicator is relevant to improved understanding of policies by staff, it speaks only to one specific policy and does not take into account how the measure is influenced by the court process.

In addition to the indicator measures, agency participants described how they expanded their use of data. They are "*more aware of data*" and "*use it more to inform*" their work. They are using "*human resources data to look at vacancies, time to fill, length of time in a position*" and explained how using data identified "*inconsistency in supervision.*" One participant noted, "*In child welfare we're not good at the data discussion…. Now non-data people are actually talking intelligently about data. It's wonderful.*" They described how data are used for managerial oversight, saying the "*specific push for the report was monitoring.*" Some, however, articulated doubts, stating, "*I'm not sure we always interpret it accurately*" and sometimes we "*make assumptions rather than digging deeper.*" There was also the feeling that the agency's use of data is "*always about what we aren't doing right.*" Together, all of these examples illustrate the expanded use of data throughout the agency for managerial oversight and tracking of agency outcomes.

For the second SDM activity – develop a system feedback mechanism – Cuyahoga County chose to implement the ChildStat model. Their results show a consistent monthly process integrated into routine agency managerial oversight. The implementation process followed the prescribed model,

with a summary of the session sent via email to all agency staff afterwards that clarified policies and practices (see Exhibit 17).

Exhibit 17. Cuyahoga County Implementation of ChildStat

Data reports
Case randomly selected
Case presented

Case-specific practices are discussed

Critical practice & policy issues are identified

Summary of session is sent to agency staff & policies/practices are clarified

Agency participants tended to have a shared understanding of ChildStat, but described variation in their experiences with it, based on their agency position. Agency leadership described *"ChildStat as really key in helping to identify system-wide issues"* and said that *"we have done better quality work because of ChildStat."* Conversely, managers, supervisors and frontline caseworkers reported that, for them, ChildStat did not seem to be about discussing systemic processes and barriers but instead focused on the negative aspects of individual casework. They said, *"the ChildStat focus should have been on system issues/barriers but it became about 'why did you do this'"* and *"ChildStat was real severe negativity and attacking of casework"* and *"anxiety provoking."* While there was evidence that the agency implemented ChildStat, feedback about it was mixed and it did not seem to include a mechanism for frontline caseworkers to share their concerns with agency leadership.

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Jefferson County Activities and Outputs. For the first SDM activity – review, set and track outcome measures to improve agency practice and performance – Jefferson County developed and produced quarterly administrative data reports with more than 12 indicators measuring 10 OTF outputs and child safety (Exhibit 18). As noted, the identified indicators (see Appendix C) measured just one aspect of the concept. Results

Exhibit 18.   Outputs Tracked in Jefferson County

1. Vacancy rates
2. Time to fill a position
3. Turnover rates
4. Workload
5. Timely face-to-face contact with child
6. Timely decision making
7. Decision-making consistency
8. Decision-making quality
9. Improved understanding of policies by staff
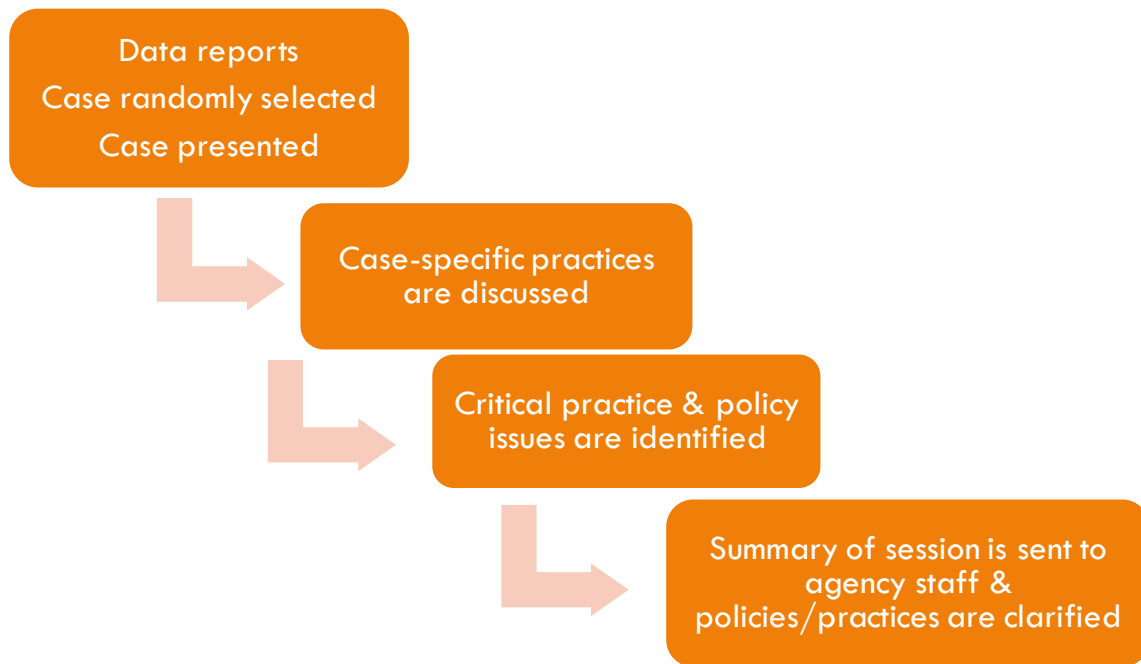10. Child safety

from administrative data analysis for these outputs are presented in Sections 3.4 Workforce and 3.6 WDM.

In addition to developing measures to track outputs and agency outcomes, Jefferson County participants discussed how data reports are used for managerial oversight. One participant said, *"So we go in depth in management team with data reports about once a quarter. And then we try and share the outcomes."* They described the successful development of an automated staff position tracking report, one saying, *"The position tracking also tracks, not only how many do we have hired, but how many do we have, what we call, available."* They also explained how data are used to inform agency practices. *"We wanted to dive into that data, and that's where we ended up with that, with our work stream three with that. For our substance abuse, we took the overall data and broke it down to figure out where can we make a difference."*

For the second activity – the system feedback mechanism – Jefferson County considered ChildStat, but ultimately chose another process. According to agency participants, one reason for not choosing ChildStat was resources. When we *"heard the examples we learned that we didn't have enough lights and resources at the site."* Another centered on agency morale and concerns that ChildStat might contribute to a negative work environment. One agency participant described it this way: *"We wanted to steer away from the fear-based culture and the fear and the worry that people had."* So, ultimately, Jefferson County decided that ChildStat was not the best fit for their organization's climate and culture and pursued an alternative approach, one that capitalized on a process already in place.

At the time of OTF launch, Jefferson County used a team-based approach – Red Team to make decisions about how to screen referrals to the child abuse hotline. All levels of agency staff, including frontline caseworkers, participated in Red Team rotation. Specifically, the process required

the team to collectively review referral information and then decide whether to screen it in or out. If the referral was screened in, the team then decided the appropriate track (e.g., investigation or alternative response) and response time for the case.

As part of OTF implementation, Jefferson County decided to add a quality assurance methodology to their Red Team process called Red Team Quality Assurance (Red Team-QA). Each week a referral is randomly selected and blindly assigned to all five Red Teams. Each Red Teams reviews the referral and makes a screening decision and, if screened in, a track assignment decision (e.g. assessment or investigation). Afterwards, the decisions are sent to the management team and all Red Team members. If all decisions are not consistent, then a manager from one team makes the final decision by consulting with another manager and supervisors from other teams. The manager sends out an email to all of the Red Team participants and the management team with an explanation and the final screening decision. The management team discusses these inconsistences, which lead to guidance on screening decisions. The decisions inform routine screening practices and are shared at all staff meetings, thereby facilitating a complete system feedback mechanism (see Exhibit 19).

Exhibit 19.   **Jefferson County Implementation of Red Team-QA**
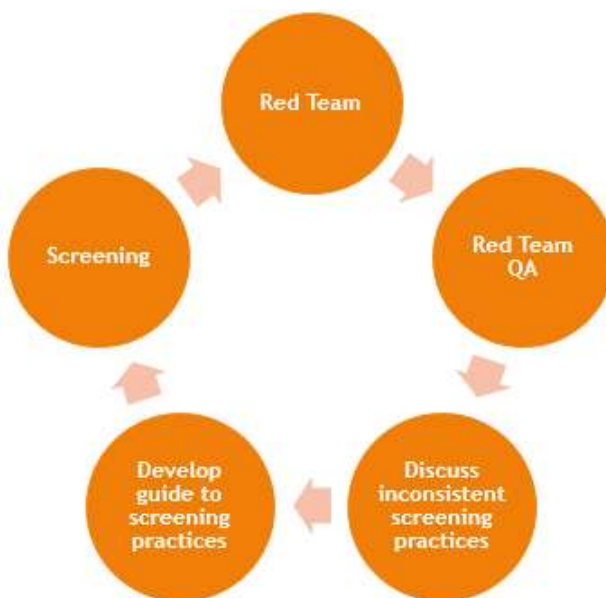
Jefferson County also developed two additional feedback mechanisms, one to inform agency policies and practices and another to address staff concerns. To inform agency policies and practices, work group members systematically solicited feedback from staff each time a new activity

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or procedure was developed and implemented. The objective was to get firsthand information about how well it was working in day-to-day practice. One agency participant described it this way: *"We came back and checked in to see how people were doing, with how it was doing for group supervision and individual supervision – we did a focus group."* Work group members compiled the information and made recommendations to the OTF Steering Committee about whether to modify, discontinue or proceed with the specific activity. In this way, staff at all levels were able to provide important input into agency practices.

To address staff concerns, in August 2015 Jefferson County implemented a staff satisfaction survey, which is now implemented annually. The purpose of the survey was to identify key concerns that, once addressed, would lead to improvements in the culture and climate of the agency. Each year, survey results are shared in an all-staff meeting to demonstrate that staff concerns are heard and, when feasible, addressed. One participant expressed it this way: *"So we always make sure to give them an overview of the results of the job satisfaction survey."* The survey results are also a data-informed method to demonstrate agency progress. For example, over time, survey findings have shown increases in job satisfaction and improvements in organizational culture. The survey results also inspired work group members to create a fourth OTF work stream, Organizational Health.

Summary of SDM Results. Sites successfully engaged in the expected SDM activities with some notable parallels but also key differences. Similarities included creation of tracking measures to improve agency outcomes and the expanded use of data, particularly for managerial oversight. One distinct difference between the two sites was the perception of the use of data. Jefferson County participants described data use more broadly – as a tool to inform and improve agency practices – rather than seeing it exclusively as a managerial tool. Another difference was in the application of the second SDM activity – develop a system feedback mechanism. Cuyahoga County implemented ChildStat, whereas Jefferson County implemented Red Team-QA and other feedback mechanisms. There was considerable variation by site in how agency staff experienced implementation of system feedback mechanisms. In addition, Jefferson County implemented an annual staff satisfaction survey that demonstrated improvements in worker satisfaction over time and inspired work group members to develop a fourth work stream, Organizational Health.

In terms of the expected outputs, qualitative and survey data show increased awareness of data to inform work, but did not assess the extent to which staff make the connection between front-end

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practice and permanency. Qualitative data show that leaders in both sites felt positively about these activities and perceived improvement in their understanding of barriers.

3.6 Strengthen Worker Decision Making Work Stream Activities and Outputs

The WDM strategy focused on understanding how frontline decisions are made and implementing strategies to support and improve decision making. The work stream consisted of five key implementation activities: (1) develop and use actionable data; (2) create manageable, equitable workloads; (3) establish a supervisory model; (4) install pre-removal team meetings; and (5) install ShadowBox (see Exhibit 1 logic model). The OTF designers intended for these activities to improve frontline caseworker decision making. The expected outputs consisted of improved workloads, worker competence, decision-making quality, consistency, timeliness, and increased timely face-to-face contact with children.

This evaluation focused on the first three WDM activities. The fourth activity was not a focus of implementation because, prior to OTF, a Team Decision Making (TDM) model for pre-removals was already in place in both sites. Survey results confirmed a team-based process in both sites. Because ShadowBox was nascent during OTF, it was also excluded from the evaluation. The following sections describe the three activities of focus and the outputs for each site.

Cuyahoga County Activities and Outputs. The first activity involved developing actionable data. The idea was to create a process to pull in and compile multiple administrative sources of case-specific data to assist frontline caseworkers in their decision making. One Casey informant described the concept this way:

> *"The way that was defined was that there are a number of other systems outside child welfare that have valuable information, and the question for workers when they're in the midst of an investigation, it's a two-part thing: So the first part of actionable data is, 'Can I easily access data from those other systems?' The second part of the question, which is really harder in a way, is 'Well, what do I do with it once I have it? And what weight do I give it?'"*

With this concept in mind, the WDM work group members explored the option of bringing in administrative data from other outside agencies in a centralized way to be used by frontline caseworkers. The Casey informant described it this way:

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"So they pulled a collection of different police databases, court databases, information for different services, and really compiled it all into one spot so that workers would be able to basically quickly pull up information as they needed it. And even if they had iPads, they could be out in the field and if they needed to quickly check to see – if I'm doing a soft check, if this person had any criminal background, they would have easier access to it to help with their decision making there. We made attempts to work with their police department to get better access to records quicker – to have access to these records quicker to make decisions. The effort was there."

Over time, however, the work group members determined that bringing together these sources of data was too challenging and not feasible for OTF. Nevertheless, one of the agency supervisors took the concept and developed an iPad resource app for frontline caseworkers. The app pulls resource information (services, etc.) together so that frontline caseworkers can easily access it. While the app does not draw information from all the original targeted outside administrative systems, it provides valuable information for frontline caseworkers to inform their decision making about services.

The second WDM activity focused on creating manageable and equitable workloads. In Cuyahoga County, the WDM work group concentrated their efforts on addressing workloads in the initial phases of OTF. One Casey informant recalled,

"In the first year of the worker decision-making group, there was a lot of time and this group was composed of frontline workers, supervisors, managers, etc. So it was a broad cross-section. A lot of time was spent digging into, 'Well, what are the caseloads? What are the criteria that impact those caseloads? What's affecting them and what do we do to solve that?'"

As part of this work, the agency began manually generating monthly workload data reports that were used as part of the ChildStat process to inform decision making. Because the reports were not automated and not provided to Casey quarterly throughout implementation, the evaluation team was not able to perform statistical analysis to determine a significant drop in workload due to OTF. Nevertheless, agency participants collectively perceived a reduction in workloads, expressing that *"caseload size did come down."* Even with the perceived improvements, participants also agreed that the recent external events (e.g., child fatality) had a negative impact on caseloads, making them unmanageable. One agency participant said, *"We've worked really hard going in one direction, but now it is going the other out of control."* The survey results also confirm the current unmanageable state of workloads (4.2 out of 5.0). Participants believed that OTF made a difference in manageability of workloads, but the progress was derailed due to unforeseen external pressures.

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The third WDM activity consisted of establishing a supervisory model (see Exhibit 20). Cuyahoga County participants described creating a model that they believed had potential. The specifics of the model were not shared because their efforts to implement it were unsuccessful. Several participants shared frustrations over this fact. One stated, *"We developed a supervisory model but there was no messaging and it was never fleshed out."* Another shared that, *"Our supervisory model, it's a nice piece of work, but it's now sitting on a shelf."* Despite this, some results were favorable for supervision as a matter of regular agency practice, unrelated to OTF. Supervisors reported that, *"I try to get workers to critically think, coach and mentor"* them and *"I check in to see how they are doing"* and *"I work on practice behaviors – conflict resolution and problem solving."* Caseworkers also expressed the importance of supervision: *"Having someone that is experienced and been around awhile is very beneficial"* and *"I meet with my supervisor and we discuss what's going on with the family and what services are in place."* Survey responses were similar. On average (2.2 out of 5.0), staff were satisfied with their supervision and met weekly. Supervision consistency, however, was not considered as favorably. Thus, even though the supervisory model was not implemented, there were some reported positive supervision outputs, but they were unrelated to OTF.

Exhibit 20.   Cuyahoga County Supervisory Model

Activities	Expected Outputs	Observed Outputs

• Supervisory model
 	
  • *"[Developed a] supervisory model but no messaging and never fleshed out"*
 	
• Supervisory assessment of worker competencies (survey)
	• Increase worker competence
	
	  • Conflict management [S]
	
	  • Self assessment of behavioral competencies [S]
		• Strengthen supervision and coaching**
		  • Overall satisfaction with supervision [S]
		
		  • Neutral on consistency in individual supervision [S]
		
		  • Elements of coaching during focus groups [Q]
		
		**Implementation activity*

Note: Q, A and S indicate that the outputs were observed in (Q) qualitative data, (A) administrative data analysis or (S) survey data.

In terms of expected WDM outputs, the administrative data analysis for Cuyahoga County showed improvements in two of the five expected areas (see Exhibit 21). These included (1) timely decision making for non-investigative assessments (using ITS) and (2) a trend toward more decision-making

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consistency across units in percentage of case decisions for ongoing services versus case closure (see Appendix C). There were no significant improvement trends in timely completion of traditional investigative assessments, consistency across units in the percentage screened in or decision-making quality.

Exhibit 21.   Trends in Decision-Making Outputs: Are the Data Trending in the Right Direction?

Outputs	Cuyahoga County	Jefferson County
Increase timely face-to-face contact	NSa	
Immediate response		✔
3-day response, 5-day response		NS
Increase timely decision making		
Investigative assessments completed within 60 days	NSb	✔
Non-investigative/family assessment response assessments completed within 60 days	✔+	✔
Increase decision-making consistency across units		
% screened in	NS	NS
% assessments with case type changed to ongoing vs. closed	✔	
Improve decision-making quality		
% entering care within 30 days of case type change to ongoing	NS	
% placements terminated within 30 days of removal	NS	NS

✔+ Association between OTF and a trend toward improvement (ITS analysis).

✔ Trend in the desired direction during implementation, but no baseline (trend analysis). **NS** No statistically significant finding.

aTimely contact analysis was exploratory; categories changed during implementation. See Appendix C.

bCuyahoga County's timely decision making was analyzed with ITS analysis.

Jefferson County Activities and Outputs. For the first activity – develop actionable data – Jefferson County explored the feasibility of compiling data from other administrative systems. Similar to Cuyahoga County, they decided that it was too complicated and developed an alternative process. They decided that the emphasis should be on system-level processes through the *"use of data already available to make decisions… position tracking and time to hire… Red Team and how to assign cases... and how to bring it together to use it to support the site in a different way"* (Casey informant). Thus, the concept of actionable data in Jefferson County developed into a process of using existing system-wide data to inform agency practices.

For the second activity, Jefferson County developed two tools to track manageable and equitable workloads. The first, the *Scorecard for Work Stream 2* (Scorecard), tracks the average number of new assessments per worker and the number of workers with 11 or more new assessments on a monthly basis. The second tool, an electronic case assignment database, was developed during OTF to make the assignment process more equitable. One participant shared that "*we were able to design an electronic*

assigning board now; on that electronic board, you can also figure out who's on vacation, who can't take any cases right now."

All three evaluation data sources (qualitative, survey and administrative data) provided evidence of improved workloads in Jefferson County. Qualitative data collection participants expressed a unifying belief that OTF helped workloads. They shared that *"caseloads have decreased over the last several years, so…the job is more manageable."* Survey results were consistent (2.8 out of 5.0), particularly for those employed prior to 2015. ITS analysis also provided evidence of a significant decrease in workload after OTF implementation; specifically, OTF was associated with a 1.1 decrease in the average number of new assessments per worker after OTF began (see Exhibit 22).

Exhibit 22.   Workload: Before and After On the Frontline Began, Jefferson County: Interrupted Time Series Fit Line
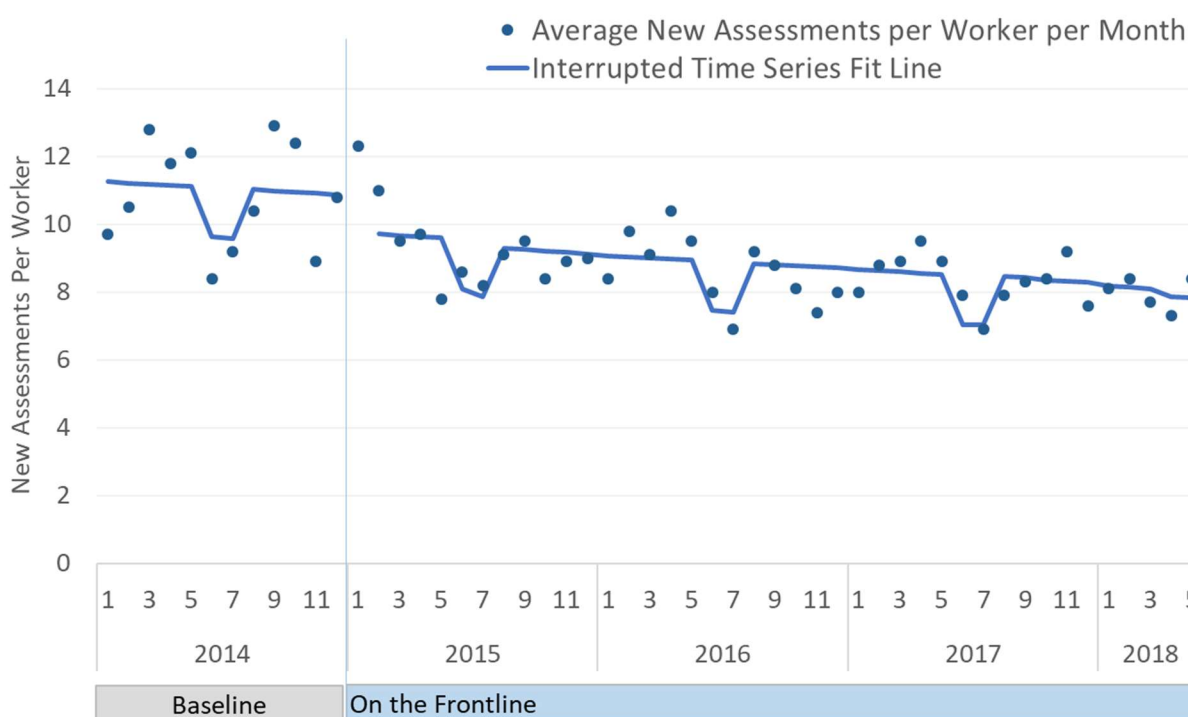
For the third activity, Jefferson County established a supervisory process, consisting of a structured format for individual supervision with specific guidance for both supervisors and caseworkers (see Exhibit 23). The intent is to support frontline caseworkers to *"make sure that you're not just talking about cases, but you're also really looking at their resiliency plans and what are their goals for the future."* One agency participant explained, *"I think we came out with, not a policy, but a procedure to supervision…. We*

came up with a form and a format and expectations." The *Supervisor's Individual Coaching and Supervision Guide* provides structure for supervision sessions, with an emphasis on check-in, workload and performance-related topics, specific practice competencies, professional goals and caseworkers' resiliency plans. There is also a section that solicits feedback about supervision and agency practices. A parallel guide was developed to assist caseworkers in preparing for supervision.

Similarly, a specific format was developed for group supervision to provide structure and promote uniformity. To facilitate discussion, a specific practice topic is chosen and presented in the bi-monthly newsletter. One agency participant explained it this way: *"The supervisor has a practice discussion based on the* Children Thrive in Families *newsletter every other month in group supervision."* The objective of the supervisory process is to strengthen supervision and coaching by providing structure to increase consistency.

Exhibit 23.   Jefferson County Supervisory Model

Note: Q, A and S indicate that the outputs were observed in (Q) qualitative data, (A) administrative data analysis or (S) survey data. [=] Congruent between data sources. [< >] Differences between data sources.

Individual supervision findings were consistent. Qualitative data showed improvement in supervision consistency across supervisors, with one participant noting*: "Before OTF, supervisors all did supervision a little bit differently, and all had a little bit different expectation"* and *"What I see is more consistency within supervisors and their teams versus thinking about intake across the board."* Survey and qualitative results showed that supervision was broader than a case review process and included a focus on well-being,

resiliency plan/goals and coaching. *"Our supervisors are not just doing supervision, but they're using their relationship in a coach-like manner as well"* (Agency participant). Survey results (1.9 out of 5.0), on average, showed satisfaction with supervision and improvements in supervision quality. Supervisor consistency was the same or somewhat better and meetings took place weekly.

Group supervision findings were mixed. Survey results, on average, demonstrated that group supervision was beneficial and that supervisors facilitate it well (1.9, 2.1 out of 5.0). Qualitative participants expressed some inconsistency, noting *"group supervision is the only thing that's not consistent."* Overall, Jefferson County staff felt positive about individual and group supervision and believed that individual supervision improved because of OTF.

For the expected WDM outputs in Jefferson County, the administrative data analysis showed improvements in three of the five expected areas (see Exhibit 21). Two trend analyses showed significant improvement in timeliness of face-to-face contact with alleged victims when the designated response time was "immediate" (within 8 hours), but there was no trend for three-day and five-day response times. There was also trend improvement in timely decision making for high-risk assessment (HRA) and family assessment response (FAR) referrals. There were no notable improvements in decision-making quality or consistency, although qualitative and survey data showed perceptions of improvement in these areas.

Summary of WDM Results. Both sites implemented activities related to actionable data, manageable workloads and supervisory models. Each site approached the development of actionable data distinctly. Cuyahoga County set out to compile information from other administrative data sources for frontline caseworkers to support their decision making; although they faced barriers, this was the catalyst for a caseworker iPad resource app. Jefferson County decided to use their existing data resources to create a system-wide process to improve agency practices. Both sites made efforts to reduce workload, and Jefferson County developed several tools to support this work. Both sites developed a supervisory model or process.[4] Jefferson County implemented the supervisory process, which, participants said, provided increased consistency in individual supervision.

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[4] Cuyahoga County carried out the supervisory model activities under the Workforce work stream but there were some crossover supervisory activities under WDM so it is discussed in the WDM work stream with Jefferson County.

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Both sites had qualitative evidence that workloads became smaller, and Jefferson County's administrative data provided empirical evidence of this. While efforts to monitor and reduce workloads were part of the WDM work stream, both sites emphasized how Workforce-related activities were also directly related to the ability to do so. For example, creating manageable workloads required tracking factors such as the number of positions and available staff. To do this effectively, work groups had to cross-collaborate. Participants perceived some improvements in supervision.

On the WDM indicators, there was evidence of improved timeliness in decision making for non-investigative assessments in both sites, but no evidence of improvement for decision-making quality measures; findings varied by site for the remaining indicators. There were also two areas that could not be evaluated. Worker competence, an expected output of the supervisory model, could not be assessed because there was no reliable measure of it. The "strengthen supervision and coaching" activity, initially conceptualized as part of the Workforce work stream (see Exhibit 1), became part of the supervisory model during implementation and was not evaluated separately.

3.7　Child Safety and the OTF Initiative

Child safety was the driving force behind the OTF initiative: Implementing the three key strategies would improve front-end practices and ultimately increase child safety. During implementation, both sites tracked a series of safety indicators, but operationalized them differently. Cuyahoga County tracked the presence of (1) repeat maltreatment after substantiated or indicated referral, (2) subsequent maltreatment after a non-investigative referral and (3) four indicators of subsequent referrals (i.e., investigative referral after investigative referral, investigative referral after non-investigative referral, non-investigative referral after investigative referral and non-investigative referral after non-investigative referral). Jefferson County framed their safety indicators as (1) the absence of subsequent maltreatment after a founded high-risk assessment, (2) the absence of subsequent maltreatment after a family assessment response and (3) two indicators of the absence of subsequent referrals (i.e., absence of subsequent accepted assessment after HRA, absence of assessment after FAR). The evaluation team defined child safety as the absence of subsequent maltreatment within 12 months for two groups of children: (1) those assigned to an investigation

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with substantiated maltreatment and (2) those assigned to a non-investigative referral/family assessment response.[5, 6]

Findings from the exploratory ITS analyses indicated no relationship between OTF and child safety outcomes within 12 months of the initial referral. The percentage of children considered "safe" was relatively consistent over time. In one site, the percentage of children with no repeat maltreatment trended toward improvement descriptively, but this was not statistically significant after controlling for the alternative response approach, which essentially redefined what gets counted as maltreatment (see Appendix C). Given the limitations of the child safety analyses, described in the methods (2.2) and limitations (4.3) sections, we cannot draw conclusions about the relationship between OTF and child safety at this time.

3.8   Site Perspectives: Successes, Challenges and Lessons Learned

This section describes the sites' perspectives of the successes, challenges and lessons learned from OTF implementation. They had similar shared successes and unique site-specific challenges. Both shared common lessons learned, including recommendations to other sites considering similar reform efforts.

Shared Successes. As part of qualitative data collection, the evaluation team asked all participants to describe their perceptions of OTF implementation successes and benefits. Both sites identified similar successes, reflective of the Workforce and SDM work streams, such as improved hiring, increased workforce stability and increased use of data. Related to Workforce, Cuyahoga participants described how they *"improved the process to bring in right staff with competencies"* and that *"there was reduction in vacancies"* and that *"I think the behavioral interviewing has proven to be exponentially helpful."* Jefferson participants discussed how they *"implemented a really good way of doing hiring through the behavioral-based interviewing"* and *"I'd have to say the way that we restructured our hiring practice overall…has gone well"* and that

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[5] For the analysis, we reframed Cuyahoga County's indicators to measure the *absence* of subsequent maltreatment. "Substantiated" refers to substantiated or indicated referrals in Cuyahoga and founded HRA in Jefferson County.

[6] We asked (1) Of children with substantiated abuse or neglect assessments during the quarter, what percentage did not have a subsequent substantiated abuse/neglect assessment within 12 months? and (2) Of children with non-investigative referrals/FAR during the quarter, what percentage did not have a subsequent substantiated abuse/neglect assessment within 12 months.

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"it helped with retention and turnover." For SDM, Cuyahoga participants increased their reliance on data: *"We made improvements on quarterly measures"* and *"identification of systemic issues via ChildStat"* and *"we learned to use the data and ask questions about the data."* Jefferson participants explained how their use of data improved decision-making consistency: *"We are using that data to make decisions or change the way that we look at families, or cases, or assessments, I think that has gone well,"* and *"OTF supported focus on consistency and evaluating RED Team; leads to better assignments, caseworkers less overwhelmed,"* and *"98 percent of our decisions are consensus based."*

Participants also identified WDM successes, but these were unique to each site. For example, Cuyahoga participants discussed improvements in the timeliness of their assessments, while Jefferson participants noted more consistency in supervision. In terms of benefits, Cuyahoga participants believed that OTF led to growth opportunities for staff and improved collective collaboration across the agency. *"There were opportunities for growth for staff to chair, lead a group"* and *"I think having the diverse parts of the agency come together and work on that is a real strength and a benefit."* Jefferson participants expressed how OTF led to improved organizational health. *"We started listening to employees and really started getting some buy-in from them"* and we're *"proud that we've actually done the job satisfaction survey"* and *"We have a much more positive work environment and workforce."*

Site-Specific Challenges. The evaluation team also inquired about barriers and challenges to implementation. Each site experienced unique challenges, but Cuyahoga's challenges were more pronounced than Jefferson's. Cuyahoga participants highlighted several barriers that hampered implementation. The first was follow-through of the work groups specifically and agency staff in general. Participants described a series of initiated activities that were never completed. Regarding the supervisory model, *"I think what's been most challenging was the development of the new supervisory model…. I think we didn't force the practicing of it enough so it didn't become a routine".* Regarding ChildStat and a system feedback loop: *"Don't feel like we'd ever used [ChildStat] as a living tool…. It's really not case focused…. We've never done anything of the recommendations"* and *"Information does not go anywhere"* and *"We stopped taking the time to connect the things that we were doing to the external outcomes."*

Another barrier included agency contextual factors and unforeseen external events. During OTF implementation, Cuyahoga County underwent significant higher level leadership and organizational changes and implemented a complete shift in practice. Participants expressed frustration, stating, *"Our momentum was interrupted at 18 months due to a model shift"* and *"We do too many things at the same*

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time." Participants also reflected on how high-profile external events affected implementation, specifically *"child fatalities…and we jump in and change direction when influenced by media or politics."* These events, particularly the model shift, directly changed agency practices at the same time as OTF implementation so that it felt overwhelming.

The final barrier was the management of the work groups and the scope of the initiative. In the last year of implementation, the SDM and WDM work group members combined activities, resulting in less clarity around their objectives. This, in turn, slowed down the progress of the work groups. Participants believed that the emphasis shifted from the original OTF goals to agency goals unrelated to OTF. *"Goals may have gone off course, may have changed to accomplish different things – what leadership wanted to accomplish."* Others conveyed that the *"initiative was too long"* and required too many resources. Work group members also felt that they had little to no decision-making input about OTF implementation. One participant expressed it this way: *"Work that the work streams did was almost for nothing…. It was going to get discussed at Steering and the decisions were going to be made there."* Another said, *"people working on work groups not able to make decisions – upper management made all decisions."* Collectively, these barriers impeded the OTF implementation process in Cuyahoga County and created frustration for the participants.

Jefferson County participants identified several challenges to OTF implementation, but they were negligible in comparison. One had to do with the general resistance to change: *"I think that anytime that you're changing practice, like I said, there's push-back and it becomes difficult at first."* One challenge was about time demands beyond regular job duties: *"Early on sometimes the rapid pace of three work groups…people feel stress."* Another consisted of co-occurring initiatives and events that might obfuscate OTF results: *"So right before we started this, the caseworkers got significant raises"* and *"other concurrent initiatives such as IV-E work, permanency round tables, consortium on trauma"* and *"outside of agency factors, state implemented the state-wide hotline, which increased our call volume a little bit and increased the number of referrals coming in."* The final challenge included engaging in initiative-related efforts that seemed futile or off target. Examples included, *"We'll look at a data and say, we're weak in this area…we need to improve on it…but then there's no management around that. So it just kind of falls away"* and *"When you're looking at outcomes, sometimes there might not be anything there in the data, and you have to invest resources to even get to that point. So that's a challenge"* and *"The main goal didn't change, but there was a lot added to it."* Together, these barriers had a trivial impact on OTF implementation in Jefferson County.

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Lessons Learned. There were three collective lessons learned across participants in both sites:

1. Engage staff at all levels and across all programs.

2. Create clear and agency-specific plans and goals and stick with them.

3. Develop a system feedback loop; be open to reflection and feedback from all levels, including frontline caseworkers.

This section describes them in detail.

Engage Staff at All Levels. OTF work group activities were primarily targeted toward improving front-end (intake/short-term services) practices. Participants in both Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties emphasized the necessity of including and engaging staff in all areas and at all levels of the organization during the entire implementation process. The purpose is to facilitate overall agency buy-in and provide the opportunity for positive change throughout the agency. According to one Cuyahoga County participant, *"As a worker, it was helpful to be involved.... I would encourage people be involved at every level in coming up with ideas and decisions, just in the entire process."* A Jefferson County participant also expressed similar sentiments:

> *"A lot of the work that we were doing, you could see intake, it making a difference. But in permanency, you could sort of see maybe their work environment wasn't the best. Or how they were onboarding people and that kind of stuff. But it was because they weren't hearing the same information. They weren't part of those work groups. And so I think if we had just had everyone involved at the same time, there would've been a cleaner – the changes happening throughout the agency at the same time instead of trying to catch people up once we were like, 'Why are we doing this just with intake?'."*

Ultimately, both sites expanded to include back-end staff during implementation, and so future implementation should include both front-end (intake/short-term services) and back-end (permanency/long-term services) staff.

Create Clear and Agency-Specific Plans and Goals. Multiple staff at each site highlighted the need to establish clear agency-specific implementation goals and plans during the OTF process. In both Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties, work groups with unclear goals and plans experienced a lack of focus and stalled progress. One Cuyahoga participant noted that establishing clear goals in their work group *"would've helped keep us on track."* Another participant in Jefferson County said, *"I think it would've been helpful to identify some long-term goals at the very beginning so that the group had a focus."* These

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statements reflect the need to articulate clear goals in the beginning of the implementation and stay focused on them.

Develop a System Feedback Loop. Finally, both sites identified the necessity of developing system feedback loops and valuing staff reflection and input during the OTF implementation process. Participants in Cuyahoga frequently mentioned the importance of listening to frontline caseworkers and valuing their feedback throughout the initiative. One agency participant stressed that, *"the top-down isn't always the best way to go, especially with something like this, because you need the ideas of the people who are doing the actual work."* According to another agency participant, *"You have to see things through the eyes of the people who are here and doing the work. I think that's so far our greatest downfall in this initiative and others, is when we've made decisions that weren't fully informed by the people that were on what they call the dance floor. It's all the balcony."* A Jefferson County participant reinforced this theme by stressing the importance of following up on feedback received: *"I think if you're going to do a job satisfaction survey and you're not going to do anything, it's just going to hurt rather than help your agency."* Sharing the results of the annual staff survey and setting up a process to address staff concerns was an important step to do so. According to participants in both sites, seeking out and listening to, and following up on, feedback from frontline caseworkers and supervisors contribute to feelings of initiative ownership and empowerment, and this is critical to the overall success of the initiative.

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4. Discussion

4.1 Cross-Cutting Key Findings

The OTF initiative set forth to test the implementation of three concurrent strategies – build a strong workforce, strengthen system decision making and strengthen worker decision making – to improve front-end practice, and ultimately child safety. The evaluation team conducted an implementation evaluation by examining seven research questions in two public child welfare sites to determine if they implemented OTF as intended, and if their efforts led to improved outcomes. Our results reveal five key cross-cutting findings:

- **Key Finding #1.** OTF was resource intensive and TA was essential.

- **Key Finding #2.** Agency leadership and contextual factors influenced implementation.

- **Key Finding #3.** The Workforce strategy showed consistent implementation and positive results.

- **Key Finding #4.** The SDM strategy led to increased use of actionable data and highlighted the importance of frontline caseworker feedback.

- **Key Finding #5.** The WDM strategy varied in implementation and showed mixed results.

This section describes these findings in detail.

Key Finding # 1: OTF Was Resource Intensive and Technical Assistance Was Essential. Implementing OTF required substantial agency commitment and resources. OTF is a system-level effort and required participation of agency staff at all levels, including frontline caseworkers and supervisors, managers, leaders and the agency director, as well as HR and information technology (IT). The specific roles and viewpoints of all these staff were necessary to create system-level change throughout the two agencies. Sites had to collaborate with IT staff in their agency familiar with child welfare data systems to compile data reports to fulfill OTF's data component. They also had to work together with HR to change hiring practices.

Casey TA was critical throughout all phases of OTF implementation. Casey consultants provided important insight about how the strategies and associated work stream activities fit together. They brought in HR expertise to help sites develop the behavioral competencies and facilitate buy-in from

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the agency's HR department. They provided data expertise to guide development of data reports like the quarterly indicator measures. Casey consultants worked closely with each site and championed the initiative in all aspects. According to the sites, Casey TA was essential in all phases of the initiative.

Key Finding #2: Agency Leadership and Contextual Factors Influenced Implementation.
Agency leadership and contextual factors influenced implementation. Casey considered the investment of the child welfare director as one of their site selection criteria. OTF implementation success centered on agency-wide inclusion of all staff (e.g., frontline) representing all program areas. For this to occur, each site needed the buy-in, direct involvement and leadership of the child welfare director throughout all phases of implementation. The child welfare director in both sites remained constant and provided strong leadership continuity, which facilitated the activities of the work groups.[7]

Agencies had to invest in the concurrent implementation of all three strategies for OTF to be successful as designed. The OTF designers believed it was fundamental to the initiative to test them together. Agency leaders needed to see value in executing all three at the same time. Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties embraced the simultaneous implementation of all three. Allegheny County, however, discontinued their OTF work because they wanted to prioritize Workforce. They did not share the same opinion about the value of the other two strategies, so they ultimately dropped out because of the unwillingness to embrace all three.

All three sites were county-administered public child welfare systems. The OTF designers believed that the initial testing would be more successful in a county system rather than across an entire state because of the concurrent implementation of three strategies and the developmental stage of the initiative. The county-based context provided a more contained environment for implementation, making it easier for Casey consultants to guide OTF activities.

Organizational stability played a critical role during implementation. Cuyahoga County had notable implementation challenges driven by large-scale organizational changes. They experienced three high-level leadership changes (2015 and 2016) in their human services management structure. They implemented a major practice model shift realigning staff (March 2016), which reorganized child

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[7] In the initial phases of OTF, the Cuyahoga child welfare director changed, but remained the same thereafter.

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welfare as part of a larger agency (August 2016). They also rolled out Alternative Response, which changed the approach to child protection referrals. These factors impeded their implementation efforts. Jefferson County, on the other hand, maintained organizational consistency and experienced very few barriers during implementation.

Finally, the scope of other concurrent initiatives during OTF implementation proved to be problematic. Because OTF is resource intensive, it is challenging to implement with other major initiatives, particularly systemic practice changes (e.g., practice model shift). Cuyahoga County participants expressed clear sentiments that the agency had taken on too much by embarking on a model shift in the middle of OTF implementation, and this affected their ability to follow through with key tasks. Jefferson County engaged in other concurrent initiatives, but these seemed to be narrower in scope and did not compete with OTF implementation.

Key Finding #3: The Workforce Strategy Showed Consistent Implementation and Positive Results. The Workforce strategy showed consistent implementation and positive results. It had clearly defined objectives – improve the hiring process and stabilize the workforce – and distinct actionable activities, which facilitated implementation consistency. All three sites, including Allegheny County, had positive views about it. Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties implemented it consistently and as expected. They completely restructured their hiring processes, shifting from individual- to team-based hiring decisions. They developed site-specific behavioral competencies that drove hiring practices rather than relying on such anecdotal criteria as specific degrees or experiences (e.g., in another child welfare system). They developed a job preview so that candidates would understand the realities of child welfare work. They also established continual posting of positions and pre-vacancy positions to reduce time to fill vacant positions. As expected, vacancy rates decreased significantly in both sites and the drop was associated with OTF in Jefferson County.[8] Both reported a reduction in the time to fill positions and, in Jefferson County, there was a significant quantifiable reduction.[9] Both sites reported positive perceptions of the implementation process. While sites differ in context, they implemented the workforce strategy in a similar fashion with consistent positive results.

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[8] There was a significant downward trend during implementation in Cuyahoga County, but no baseline data to test for an association with OTF.

[9] The data were not available in Cuyahoga County to complete a quantitative analysis.

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Key Finding #4: The SDM Strategy Led to Increased Use of Actionable Data and Highlighted the Importance of Frontline Caseworker Feedback. The SDM activities focused on building agency and managerial capacity to use data to inform agency practices, and developing a system feedback mechanism. Both sites developed and used actionable data, which facilitated the work of all three work streams. They created site-specific indictor measures and reports and increased their use of data to inform decision making at the agency level. They integrated data into their managerial oversight process to identify and respond to practice-related issues. Both created system feedback mechanisms that were agency specific. Cuyahoga County chose to implement the recommended OTF ChildStat model, while Jefferson County developed Red Team-QA, a process that built on their existing infrastructure, as well as other system feedback processes. In the end, both sites accomplished the original objective to enhance agency and managerial capacity to identify and respond to "systemic barriers affecting frontline work." However, the evaluation uncovered contrasting experiences across sites, with Cuyahoga County voicing negative perceptions of implementation and Jefferson County conveying a positive view.

One explanation for these differences may be how sites chose to elicit feedback directly from frontline caseworkers (i.e., obtain the "frontline voice"). Jefferson County incorporated frontline caseworker feedback throughout OTF implementation. They described a "check-in" process for work group activities to ensure that members understood how processes affected frontline casework practice; for example, frontline caseworkers participated in focus groups and the Red Team-QA process. The agency also fielded an annual staff satisfaction survey and shared the results with all staff. They established a process for addressing staff concerns when feasible. Building on these efforts, they established a fourth work stream called Organizational Health.

Cuyahoga County also included frontline caseworkers and supervisors in OTF implementation, but participants reported that they had *"no voice"* and that their *"opinions did not matter."* A range of participants expressed this sentiment, not just frontline caseworkers. The system feedback mechanism also differed between the two sites. Cuyahoga County chose to implement ChildStat. The original description of ChildStat states that it is a *"model that allows for two-way feedback between frontline workers and managers and agency leadership. It is crucial for agency leaders to hear directly from child protection staff frontline caseworkers…."* Yet, by design, ChildStat excludes frontline caseworkers from the actual process, assuming that their voices are heard through their supervisors. Excluding caseworkers from the process creates a break in the system feedback mechanism and results in the

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perception of "loss of frontline voice." Jefferson County frontline caseworkers did not have the same experience because there were concerted efforts to include their voice in the process. **We believe that this is the critical difference in the implementation experience.** Direct frontline caseworker views are essential for a system feedback process, and the ChildStat model does not provide one.

Key Finding #5: The WDM Strategy Varied in Implementation and Showed Mixed Results.
The OTF designers described the WDM strategy as the least developed. It varied in implementation and showed mixed results. The evaluation team observed this firsthand during qualitative data collection. We did not hear consistent definition of the activities, and it was not entirely clear to us how the five key activities in the logic model connected to WDM outputs (see Exhibit 1). To complicate matters, we learned during the course of the evaluation that the work groups considered the "strengthen supervision and coaching" activity (originally with Workforce) as part of the "establish supervisory model" activity in the WDM strategy. Consequently, we had the most difficulty evaluating the WDM strategy because it was not fully developed.

The OTF designers had some specific ideas about WDM activities like actionable data, establishing a supervisory model and creating manageable and equitable workloads. However, they did not have an existing model or prescribed activities, other than TDM, which both sites already used. Even ShadowBox was not fully formed. As a result, the sites did not have a clearly defined path to follow during implementation. This also posed evaluation challenges because, without clearly defined activities, we had difficultly establishing what, specifically, to evaluate. For example, Casey informants differed in their opinions about how to operationalize "actionable data." From one perspective, it was about creating caseworker access to case-specific administrative data sources outside the agency, which, in Cuyahoga County, ultimately became an iPad services resource app for use in the field. The other perspective acknowledged that the original intent was to build a caseworker tool, but that shifted to using data already on hand to create agency-tracking tools in Jefferson County. Therefore, each site operationalized the concept differently.

WDM work group members did not have a clearly defined prototype to guide development of a supervisory model. Nevertheless, both sites developed a model or process, and Jefferson County implemented theirs. In terms of workload, both sites implemented activities, both sites reported

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reductions and Jefferson County had evidence of a *significant* reduction.[10] In terms of the decision-making outputs, both sites showed evidence of improved timeliness in decision making for non-investigative assessments, but no evidence of improvement in decision-making quality measures, and other findings differed by site. This variation is not surprising given that the OTF designers were still reworking the WDM strategy during implementation.

4.2 Recommendations and Considerations for Future Implementation in Other Sites

Based on cross-cutting findings, the evaluation team developed several recommendations for consideration for future OTF implementation in other sites. The following section describes them.

Recommendation #1. Replicate the Workforce Strategy in Other Jurisdictions. The OTF designers set out to improve the hiring process and stabilize the workforce by implementing activities connected to the Workforce strategy. While both sites differed in context, they developed parallel methods that changed their hiring practices, reduced vacancy rates and reduced time to fill positions. We expect that, if approached in a similar manner with the necessary infrastructure, similar positive results would emerge in other sites. We recommend replication and further evaluation of the Workforce strategy.

Recommendation #2. Replace the WDM Strategy. The OTF designers described the WDM strategy as the least developed. It varied in implementation and showed mixed results. We recommend that the OTF designers reconceptualize and replace the WDM strategy with "strengthen supervision and coaching." Evaluation results show that frontline caseworkers meet weekly, on average, with their supervisor and that direct interaction with a supervisor drives worker decision making. We heard evidence that OTF increased the consistency of decision making within units, but less across units, which again suggests that supervisors influence decision making. Prior research suggests that supportive supervision significantly influences frontline caseworkers' effectiveness (Mor Barak et al., 2009). The supervisory relationship is critical to caseworker decision making because of turnover and the inexperience of frontline caseworkers (e.g., frontline caseworkers

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[10]   There was monthly data available to analyze in Jefferson County. Data were not automated and not analyzable in Cuyahoga.

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expressed how hard it is to learn the job and how much they sought guidance from their supervisor – especially in the beginning).

Prior research shows that supervisors receive very little training on coaching and effective supervision (Mor Barak et al., 2009). OTF findings also revealed a deficit in guidance for supervisors. Jefferson County developed and implemented a structured supervision process as part of implementation. Prior to OTF, they had no clearly defined process, even though supervisors and caseworkers met regularly to review cases. Ohio has a state-sponsored supervisor training, but Cuyahoga County, according to OTF participants, does not have agency-specific training that supports coaching and supervisory mentorship. They also do not have a clearly defined structured supervision process, despite undertaking efforts to create and implement one during OTF. Participants confirmed that supervisor training is a *"missing link"* and that *"no one really coaches us on how to supervise,"* yet the supervisory role is pivotal in caseworker decision making.

We recommend that the OTF designers consider several ideas to inform replacement of the WDM strategy with supervision and coaching. Our suggestion is to build on the supervisory implementation activities in both sites and develop a prescribed OTF supervision model. As part of learning it, supervisors would receive training, coaching and mentoring to enhance their capacity to execute it consistently. The supervision model serves as a foundation for decision-making guidance to caseworkers. Expand the goal of manageable workloads to supervisors so that they have the time and capacity to fulfill their role. Make ShadowBox a module of the OTF model for supervision. The ShadowBox process emphasizes actual cases in the agency to promote critical thinking. Supervisors select the ShadowBox cases for their units to facilitate mastery of the framework and to guide their caseworkers' decision making. The outputs of the replaced WDM strategy continue to be similar to the decision-making quality and consistency outputs in the current logic model, along with manageable workloads (for supervisors and caseworkers).

Recommendation #3. Add a Direct Frontline Caseworker Feedback Process to the ChildStat Model (or Alternate System Feedback Mechanism) as part of the SDM Strategy. One of the reasons behind the negative perceptions and anxiety associated with ChildStat is the lack of opportunity for frontline caseworkers to share their concerns directly with management. While it is difficult for us to suggest how frontline caseworkers should be included in ChildStat, especially in a large public child welfare agency, one option is to create a process (e.g., a focus group) to simply ask

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them and then incorporate their suggestions into the process. Another possible option is to empower frontline caseworkers to self-select cases to present, in addition to the random pull, demonstrating everyday challenges. Through their cases, frontline caseworkers would share challenges and formulate "realistic" suggestions for agency leaders to help mitigate them. Since ChildStat is a managerial process to identify and improve leaders' understanding of practice issues and barriers, and to facilitate a "real-time" system feedback method to address them, this is a way to include frontline caseworkers in the process. Agency leaders would hear directly from them, which would complete the system feedback process and, potentially, reduce the punitive stigma associated with ChildStat.

Recommendation #4. Refine the Outputs in the Logic Model and Their Measures. Several outputs in the logic model were either not measured at all or were measured in a way that they were not informative. For example:

- Worker competence was not measured over time because it was not operationalized in a way that it could be measured.

- Increased awareness between front-end practice and permanency was not defined and not measured.

- Improved assessment quality was not defined and not measured.

- Improved understanding of policies by staff had one measured indicator (decision to remove made within a pre-removal meeting/per agency policy), but this concept is much broader than how it was operationalized.

We recommend refining these outputs so they are measured more effectively and so they incorporate staff perceptions over time, beginning with a pre-implementation survey. They should be refined in a specific way to operationalize them. For example, OTF designers and sites need to agree on the concept of "assessment quality" and then have a realistic way to measure it within the agency's existing resources. This may include administrative data indicators, where feasible, and suggested survey items for an annual or pre/post staff survey. OTF designers should make these revisions prior to implementation and evaluation in other sites, to be refined as needed to fit specific agency goals.

Recommendation #5. Consider Sequencing Implementation, Particularly in Large Sites, to Make the Process More Manageable. Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties implemented all three

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strategies at the same time. However, they said that if they had prioritized, they would have chosen Workforce to stabilize vacancy rates. While the OTF designers may be reluctant to sequence the strategies because of their interlocking nature, it may be worthwhile to prioritize them in sites that are interested in OTF but are unable to initiate all three simultaneously. For example, implementing OTF in a state system may require prioritization because of the size of the site. While Cuyahoga and Jefferson Counties saw the value in concurrent implementation of the three strategies, they are county-based systems, and sequencing may be necessary for a larger site like an entire state.

4.3   Limitations of Findings

The evaluation findings are exploratory and have several limitations. These include the study design, data sources, confounding evaluation factors and weaknesses of the child safety analysis. This section discusses these limitations.

Study Design. The evaluation used a retrospective, mixed methods design because the evaluation began three years after OTF implementation started. While the design has important strengths, retrospective studies have inherent challenges, such as recall issues and the inability to observe activities during implementation. The evaluation team took steps to limit recall bias and the risk of "social contagion" of responses (where erroneous or incomplete recall of one or two members can influence the group's recall), but we do not know how well these worked. In addition, we conducted surveys to gain a representative perspective of child welfare staff, but this approach cannot capture the perspectives of staff who left the agency prior to the evaluation. One site's response rate (84%) makes it more likely that responses represent current staff perspectives. The other site's low response rate (45%), however, means that results may be biased. For example, results may be biased toward respondents with long tenure at the agency, as more than half of survey participants (53%) reported being at the agency more than 10 years.

Data Sources. Each source of data has limitations, so we triangulated data across multiple data sources to strengthen the validity of the evaluation. Document review provided evidence of implementation activities and their timing. Qualitative focus groups and interviews provided an in-depth understanding of OTF implementation, whereas survey responses provided a broader representation of staff experiences. Administrative data analysis provided a more objective view of outputs over time, without recall bias or social contagion. When findings were consistent across

sources and sites, this validated findings. Taken together, the mixed methods approach helped minimize bias and maximize our understanding of the implementation activities and theoretical relationships between OTF and desired outputs. Nonetheless, we cannot make causal connections with these data.

Confounding Factors. OTF implementation took place in Cuyahoga County, a large county with a large agency, and in Jefferson County, a mid-size county with a mid-size agency, each with varied policies, approaches and populations. Both sites experienced events and changes during implementation that likely influenced resources, referral populations, implementation and/or results. The implementation timeline (Appendix D) highlights key implementation events and contextual factors (events) that occurred during implementation. In Cuyahoga County, the agency experienced three leadership changes (2015 and 2016), implemented a major model shift realigning staff (March 2016), reorganized as part of a larger agency (August 2016) and rolled out Alternative Response. The tragic death of a child involved with child protective services several months before data collection began (March 2018) may have negatively influenced responses. In Jefferson County, unrelated to OTF, the state authorized new positions (rolled out during implementation) and launched a state hotline (January 2015), after which the number of referrals increased. The county also secured an increase in caseworker salaries shortly before OTF began, making salaries more competitive with surrounding counties for a short time, until those counties reportedly increased their salaries. We incorporated confounding factors into analyses and interpretation. However, the evaluation cannot fully account for these factors, nor can we measure all factors that may influence outcomes in complex child welfare systems. While ITS analysis is appropriate to this context (e.g., to evaluating systems change efforts over time), it does not rule out other events or explanations for the findings that were not controlled for in the modeling (Lopez Bernal, Cummins & Gasparrini, 2017; Penfold & Zhang, 2013; see Appendix C).

OTF and Child Safety. Child safety was an important goal driving the development of the OTF initiative, but evidence thus far does not support improvements in child safety. For the evaluation, the relationship between OTF and child safety was exploratory, and we did not expect significant findings, for two reasons. First, implementation of OTF was formative; that is, it was in the early stages, and the OTF strategies and activities evolved during implementation. And, second, it was expected that child safety would take more than a few years to change – and to measure, given the need to observe children for another year to see if they remain safe. As such, even if OTF does

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influence child safety, as theorized, it would require long-term and consistent implementation to do so.

As the evaluation team expected at this stage, there were no significant findings supporting improvement in child safety. It is possible, of course, that OTF in its current form may have no effect on child safety, even if the strategies have other positive effects (which the evaluation has clearly demonstrated). However, there are plausible explanations for the lack of significant child safety outcomes, including the short implementation period and formative nature of OTF already mentioned, and several other limitations with the analysis, including statistical reasons and confounding factors. Statistically, there was limited power to detect change due to relatively few time points. One site had only four baseline time points and these varied with no clear trend, as did the implementation time points. Also, child safety, defined as no repeat maltreatment, was already high in one site, leaving little room for improvement. Confounding factors make it difficult to accurately measure trends in child safety and the relationship with the OTF initiative. One site changed their practice, rolling out Alternative Response during implementation. This practice change essentially altered the definition of the safety outcome, as some referrals substantiated previously tracked to Alternative Response under the new practice. Although the analyses attempt to control for this, it is difficult to disentangle the definitional change from the actual safety outcome. And, as with any ITS analysis, we cannot account for confounding factors we have not measured. With these limitations in mind, we cannot draw conclusions about the hypothesized relationship between OTF and child safety. Full implementation of the initiative and a longer observation period are necessary to explore this theoretical relationship further.

4.4   Conclusion

In conclusion, both sites expressed enthusiasm for OTF and expected to accomplish a number of goals from participation. Each site started with strong momentum, and there was clear evidence of extensive efforts. Even with these setbacks, site participants maintained a positive view of the goals of the OTF initiative, with Jefferson County fundamentally believing that it had transformed their entire agency and led to a much-improved organizational climate and culture. The improvements observed in Workforce and other successes of the initiative are promising. Although we cannot make causal connections where we did find associations, the consistent findings from triangulated data offer *preliminary* evidence to support the theorized relationships between activities and outputs,

particularly for the Workforce strategy. Results also show improved agency capacity to develop and use data to enhance agency practices, and a data-informed system feedback loop mechanism used to inform case practice and to clarify policy. One aspect of the system feedback mechanism also improved organizational health in Jefferson County. Findings also highlight areas in which implementation activities were not fully developed, perceptions of activities and outputs varied widely (and sometimes were negative) or no evidence of change was observed. Refinements to the SDM and WDM strategies are needed, followed by implementation and evaluation in other sites. Replication of the Workforce strategy is also important to continue to build evidence to support efficacy. Together, these actions will build support for the validity of OTF and the concurrent implementation of the three strategies in achieving desired outputs, and ultimately improving child safety.

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