



STRATEGY BRIEF

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

How are child welfare leaders applying **the principles of safety science to prevent harm to children?**

A strong safety culture is critical for anticipating, managing, and responding to the inevitable crises that child protection agencies across the country face. It also recognizes that a culture of fear and blame may compromise the effectiveness of the agency and, in turn, the safety of children and families. In 2018, child welfare leaders in 15 jurisdictions formed the National Partnership for Child Safety (NPCS), a quality improvement collaborative to improve child safety and reduce child maltreatment fatalities through the use of safety science. Members of the collaborative have a shared goal of strengthening families and promoting innovations in child protections.

This brief highlights the collective experiences and lessons learned from child welfare agencies that have been part of the NPCS and have begun to implement the principles of safety science during the time of COVID-19. It is intended to support child welfare leaders who seek to build a strong safety culture within their organization.¹



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Leading through crisis

For jurisdictions implementing safety science principles, the COVID-19 pandemic has been an opportunity to adapt and accelerate the pace of growth and change. In particular:

- **The physical and psychological safety of staff is critically important.** In the face of a rapidly evolving pandemic, a focus on caring for staff well-being is paramount. Efforts in child protection agencies ranged from advocacy to access personal protective equipment for frontline caseworkers to increasing the frequency of check-ins with team members who transitioned to remote work. Franklin County (Ohio) Children Services launched #SavingGRACE (Guidance, Recognition, Appreciation, Connection, Enrichment), an agency-wide internal campaign to elevate and advance safety culture in a virtual environment, emphasizing the importance of giving oneself and others grace when events don't go as planned. New Jersey's Department of Children and Families created an online COVID-19 [mindfulness toolkit](#) to support staff mental health during this stressful time.
- **Race equity and safety culture must go hand in hand.** Leaders agreed that equity and racial justice are critical to any effort to create safety for all, and psychological safety is a prerequisite for honest conversations about race and racism. Connecticut's Department of Children and Families' safety culture framework, Safe & Sound, explicitly invokes the agency's racial justice work as a key component. To create an environment of safety, the agency employs the 5 Rs: Regulate (distress), Relate, Rise up, Reason, and Respond.
- **Crisis and safety culture both require adaptive leadership skills.** With a high percentage of staff suddenly dispersed, leaders are finding they must place more trust in their frontline staff's decision-making than ever before. In fact, they must rely on the experiences and wisdom of their frontline staff to help guide them through uncharted waters. The success of the rapid transition to telework has caused several organizations to rethink "business as usual" altogether. The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services

(DCFS), for example, already has determined that many staff will continue teleworking after the crisis passes.

- **Leaders must personally spearhead and model safety culture.** To be effective, safety culture must be reflected and consistently communicated by leadership. New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) found success by starting its orientation to safety culture at the highest levels of leadership, gradually moving down through layers of management until all leaders understood how to support the culture shift. In Franklin County, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis and rollout of the #SavingGRACE campaign, leadership intentionally modeled a willingness to try new things, make mistakes, and show vulnerability when things didn't go as planned.
- **External stakeholders are essential partners.** Building a safety culture is most effective when external stakeholders, including political leaders and oversight entities, are fully engaged. In Los Angeles, Community and Cross Sector Partnership is one of three investment areas in DCFS's new strategic framework, [Invest LA](#). The Georgia Division of Family & Children Services regularly conducts case staffings before children enter foster care or are moved from one placement to another. These practice reviews, as well as critical incident reviews, include county, state, and external partners to provide a greater breadth of perspective. They also involve collaboration with the state's oversight agency, the Office for Child Advocate (OCA). The partnership with OCA helps keep the focus of reviews on systemic issues and decreases staff fears of judgment or retribution in the event of a bad outcome on a particular case.
- **Safety culture is a work in progress.** New York City's ACS has incorporated safety science into in-service trainings offered through its Workforce Institute, recognizing that efforts to sustain a safety culture must be ongoing. In Franklin County, the logo for the #SavingGRACE campaign, a hard hat, denotes that the agency's culture is always "under construction."

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Improving child and family outcomes

Many child welfare agencies saw a significant drop in hotline calls with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, some leaders mentioned efforts to **reach out to mandatory reporters**, urging them to be mindful of the children and families in their communities and providing guidance on what and how to report, and ways to connect children and families to services to prevent child welfare involvement. Others partnered with law enforcement, child advocacy centers, and schools to support wellness checks with families.

Many agencies focused on **providing proactive support for family well-being**. Such efforts included launching statewide public service announcements encouraging family strengthening and neighbor-to-neighbor support, creating web resources for families, and expanding community resource center and in-home services. A few jurisdictions created supportive warmlines to help families cope with increased social isolation. Proactive check-ins, both with resource families and families formerly involved with child welfare, was another common strategy.

A few jurisdictions were able to take advantage of the decrease in reports to **catch up on backlogged paperwork**, which may help relieve staff workload and improve care for children and families as numbers return to normal levels, or in the event of a post-COVID-19 surge. In one agency, the slower pace allowed time for hotline staff to be trained in implementing the agency's

culture shift from "looking to find maltreatment" to linking families with resources and support.

Advancing racial justice

Many leaders emphasized the importance of data to integrate race equity considerations into decisions related to child safety and safety culture, particularly **disaggregating every data point** by race and looking at data along the life of a case to **track disparities at each key decision point**. It also was noted that **addressing implicit bias**, while important, may not be enough to eliminate disparities in outcomes without also **considering systemic and policy issues that may support racial injustice**.

Many jurisdictions mentioned the importance of **institutional leadership** to address equity. Approaches to this included committees, workgroups, and learning collaboratives; designated leadership positions (such as a deputy director focused exclusively on equity); and dedicated divisions (for example, an office of equity strategies). **Inclusion in the agency's practice model and/or strategic planning framework** is another way that race equity is being addressed.

Several jurisdictions noted the importance of **examining racial inequalities** within the agency — especially in terms of hiring and workforce policies. **Disaggregating staff perceptions of the agency's safety culture by race** was suggested as a place to start.



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Engaging the workforce

Leaders have also been mindful of how they are supporting their workforce in the context of safety science, particularly in light of the pandemic. Several jurisdictions noted **advantages of teleworking**, including greater workday efficiencies as meetings don't involve travel, and having the ability to check in with staff more frequently. Some mentioned finding opportunities to **provide staff with greater access to specialized expertise** (such as child abuse pediatricians) and **higher levels of leadership** (such as conference calls with the director to address frontline staff questions).

Changes to critical incident review processes

were also seen as important ways to support staff in the shift to a safety culture. **Engaging both the critical incident review board members and union representatives as partners** in the agency's culture shift helped to earn the staff's trust. As a result of the pandemic, a few jurisdictions noticed that **allowing staff to participate in reviews remotely** from home seemed to help them feel more comfortable and engage more openly in the process.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field at Casey.org](#).

1 The information in this report was gathered from a May 13, 2020, virtual convening of the National Partnership for Child Safety that brought together child welfare leaders from 25 jurisdictions (the 15 founding jurisdictions plus 10 others) and additional experts to share their experiences related to improving child safety and preventing serious injuries and child maltreatment fatalities in the context of 21st century child welfare transformation.

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