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Introduction

As society enters the twenty-first century, too many children and families are in jeopardy, with too few resources and supports. Worldwide, the threat to the future of children can be seen in changing family characteristics and demographics.

The children being born and raised today will have to play a more significant role than did their predecessors to sustain and enrich our social and economic future. In the United States, children constitute a shrinking proportion of the total population. This trend may mean that communities will be less interested in allocating scarce resources to serve children and their families. The most recent Census Bureau statistics show that fewer than half of all U.S. families have children.¹

Among families that do have children, nearly one in three has only one parent living in the household.² In the early 1990s, single parent families constituted 24.5% of Caucasian and 63% of African American households. The corresponding proportions in 1970 were 10% for Caucasians and 36% for African-Americans. In 1993, there were 1.3 million single parent Latino families, representing 35% of all Latino families with children.³

Children in female-headed households with no other adult present are especially likely to live in poverty. A number of social factors have contributed to increasing concentrations of poverty in certain communities, including changing labor markets, increased suburbanization, relocation of companies, and continuing racial discrimination. Sociodemographic shifts have left in their wake shattered communities with a great many unemployed adults and high school dropouts, high crime rates, and high infant mortality rates. An increasing number of fami-

lies are being torn apart by substance abuse and HIV. An estimated 72,000 to 125,000 children will be orphaned by the year 2000 as a result of AIDS.⁴

Poverty not only affects the growth and development of children, it also increases family stresses that may lead to abuse or neglect. While child maltreatment occurs at all socioeconomic levels, the reported incidence of abuse and neglect is *highest* for children from low-income families.

Too many children are dying in North America's inner cities and rural communities. They are literally dying as a result of poverty and an epidemic of violence, in which America's children are both perpetrators and victims, and figuratively dying as they lose hope in the possibility of a future worth contemplating. Their spirits and their potential are being prematurely extinguished as they are failed by their families, by their schools, by their community institutions, and by a society that has not chosen to invest adequately and appropriately in the prevention, support, and when needed, remediation and treatment services that children and their families must have to lead healthy, constructive, and satisfying lives.

Many children are hastened into premature parenthood, assuming its responsibilities when they have not yet experienced the joy of being loved and cared for as children themselves. Alienated from social institutions (often including their own families), these youngsters grow up without confidence in the future and without a sense of the constructive role that each can play in contributing to a cooperative and peaceful social order.

Risk indicators for childhood trauma are rising rapidly, while resources to help are diminishing. These realities underscore the need for the child welfare field to organize itself in a maximum, sustained effort to counter the damage that so many children and families are suffering. Without a fundamental commitment to the needs of children and their families, society will remain locked in crisis.

The current public and nonprofit child welfare system provides an array of services and programs, from efforts to prevent harm to children, to investigations of reports that children have been maltreated; from services to families to prevent the unnecessary and inappropriate removal and placement of their children in out-of-home care, to the provision of appropriate, high-

quality residential treatment; and from services aimed at reunifying families, to preparation of young children in long-term out-of-home care for adoption, or of teens for living independently.

Clearly, successful intervention at the earliest stage, that is, prevention, is best for children, families, and society. As the child welfare system has developed, however, it has placed greater emphasis and funding on rehabilitative services. In human terms, the cost to society of the current underfunded, crisis-driven system is simply too high.

Redefining Child Welfare Services

The term *child welfare* has traditionally referred to the welfare, or well-being, of society's most vulnerable children. In the early days, child welfare services were provided by charitable agencies to those children whose well-being was threatened by a lack of family support. Later, society called on its government to assist needy children through the establishment of child protection laws. These laws focused child welfare more narrowly on services for children who were abused or neglected.

As time passed, the definition of *child welfare* evolved to encompass both the prevention of child maltreatment and the treatment of the effects of such abuse or neglect. Society's recognition of the importance of also addressing the needs of the families of abused or neglected children has further expanded the scope of work for today's child welfare organizations.⁵

As the conditions of the vulnerable children traditionally served by child welfare organizations became more complex, many nonprofit agencies expanded their use of governmental funding sources. Today, many private nonprofit child welfare organizations blend revenues from public child welfare, mental health, special education, juvenile justice, substance abuse treatment, developmental disabilities, and other relevant government funding streams.

Today, *child welfare* must be defined broadly enough to include the many conditions that threaten the well-being of vulnerable children. It must allow us to use a multidisciplinary approach to serving children in the context of strengthening their fami-

lies and the communities where they reside, through a full array of services funded by a broad base of governmental and non-governmental revenue sources.

It is within this broadened definition of child welfare that we prepare for the challenges ahead.

Challenges and Opportunities Facing Child Welfare Organizations

As the needs of children and their families intensify, the environment in which services are delivered is rapidly changing. The shift in governmental involvement from the federal to state/provincial and local levels is changing how decisions are made about program priorities. As the federal investment in children diminishes, local communities are taking many different paths to developing the funding necessary for services. Likewise, the involvement of for-profit service providers and national managed health care organizations has significantly increased the competitiveness and uncertainty of the business environment in which organizations must operate.

These changes threaten the long-term viability of those public and nonprofit organizations that are unable to adjust. On the other hand, the situation has created a unique opportunity for those who are able to anticipate such changes and properly prepare their organizations for them.

Managed care, with its emphasis on outcomes, expanded access to primary care services, and capitated rates, has had a major impact on practice in many communities. Managed care principles have been employed in the private physical health care domain for many years. In health care, the use of managed care has resulted in consolidation, the streamlining of services, the establishment of alliances and provider networks, and the merger of service providers.

The boundaries that once differentiated physical health care, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, child welfare, and juvenile justice are rapidly disappearing. As managed care principles are increasingly applied to all of these funding streams, child welfare organizations are challenged to completely reengineer the way in which they conceive, deliver, evaluate, and fund services. The demands for outcome account-

ability and demonstrated results require the child welfare organization to be sophisticated in its use of business principles and technology, and to possess a statistical capability.

Child Welfare in the Twenty-First Century

The tremendous stressors faced by today's children and their families, coupled with the fundamental changes taking place in the business environment, place numerous challenges at the doorstep of each child welfare organization and the field as a whole.

In many ways, the child welfare field is facing a crisis of meaning. What differentiates the child welfare profession from others? As the professions combine their efforts, what special competencies does child welfare bring that will strengthen its partnerships with other disciplines?

Today's climate requires nothing less of child welfare professionals than a shift in emphasis from managing individual organizations and people to leading a fundamental rebirth of the field of child welfare. Each government agency, each nonprofit organization, each community, must redefine itself to adapt to the changing reality. From confusion and uncertainty can come the opportunity to create a future in which the needs of children and their families are met more holistically, more thoroughly, more proactively, and more efficiently than ever before. Three operating principles should guide the child welfare organization:

- Child welfare organizations must assert the fundamental principles and values of society and the child welfare profession, which can easily become lost in the sea of change.
- Child welfare organizations must rethink old assumptions about theory and practice in the face of daunting evidence of threats to the future of children.
- Child welfare organizations must advocate clearly and emphatically for access to a comprehensive array of services for every child and family. This array of services must be adequately funded and reflective of a partnership between public and nonprofit child- and

family-serving organizations and the funding bodies that support them.

Today, our children's futures are at risk. Their future well-being is uncertain. The standards in this volume are designed to facilitate the child welfare organization's journey toward meeting these important challenges.

Notes

1. U.S. Bureau of the Census Current Population Reports, *Household and Family Characteristics: March 1993*. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994).
2. Families are defined as two or more persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together.
3. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994.
4. The Orphan Project, *Orphans of the HIV Epidemic* (New York: Author, 1994).
5. For a history of child welfare, see R. H. Bremner, *Children and youth in America: A documentary history* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

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