

A young child with curly hair is shown in profile, looking to the right. The child is holding a large, light-colored teddy bear. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and yellow, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall mood is calm and contemplative.

Improving Response to Critical Situations

Lessons Learned from CWLA Members

By Cindy Ryman Yost

According to the *New York Times*, federally declared natural disasters have increased 11% in the past seven and a half years. Recent newspaper headlines show immigration raids bringing large numbers of children into the child welfare system at one time, secure websites being hacked and encrypted donor information accessed, clients attacking staff in residential programs, and employees violating ethical practice standards. The Institute for Crisis Management estimates that the number of newsworthy crises in the United States has grown from over 6,300 per year in 1996 to more than 10,500 per year in 2005. The list of potential crises facing today's child welfare executive is large and growing. A new child welfare commissioner recently joked that, on some days, he feels as if he's just waiting for locusts.

There is no hotline for CEOs to call when hurricanes hit an emergency shelter or when a caseworker is attacked on a home visit. Because of concerns about publicity, donor relations, and competition for grants and contracts, some leaders have been hesitant to talk about challenges they have faced with clients and staff. If a client commits suicide in a residential program, executives are unsure who to ask for advice because they don't know who else has faced the same crisis.

Sharing Experience Can Benefit Others

When staff at all levels share their experiences, ask questions, and open up about the challenges faced and the lessons learned, the entire field

can benefit. “The richest resources [CWLA] has are its members and its executives,” says Jim Fitzgerald, Executive Director of Intermountain Children’s Home and Services in Montana. “Anything we can do to impact someone who is serving children and families is important.” Fitzgerald was part of a group of members who started an informal discussion about the need for members to connect with each other about their experiences.

Howard Shiffman, CEO of Griffith Centers for Children in Colorado, was also involved in that early conversation. “As leaders we need to be able to be willing to talk openly about what happens in our programs. We can learn each time an organization has to cope with a challenging situation,” he says. “In my time as a leader we have had to deal with a whole range of issues from fires to client deaths. I’m happy to talk with others about what we’ve learned and I also want to know what I can learn from them.”

That early conversation, combined with the insight of CWLA’s CEO, Christine James-Brown, sparked the idea to provide members with real support in planning for crises and responding to them. Working together with member organizations, CWLA is now developing a network of experienced leaders to assist organizations facing critical situations to provide care for their clients, staff, and agency operations; to develop enhanced organizational policies and procedures; and to collect and disseminate information on legislation and regulations that could be replicated in other states.

Making the Connection

As plans for this project were being developed last summer, record floods hit the Midwest. One of the most heavily impacted areas was the city of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Jim Ernst is CEO of the large, multi-service organization Four Oaks, and he was confronted with challenges he could never have imagined. He lost communication with his staff and needed to relocate hundreds of families in their low-income housing program, all while his own home was being affected.

Keith Leiderman, CEO of Kingsley House in New Orleans, developed a presentation for the 2008 CWLA National Conference called “Leadership When There’s No One to Ask,” based on the incredible lessons he and his organization learned from their experience with Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in 2005. Leiderman knew what Ernst was facing, not only in the days immediately following the flood, but also in the weeks and years of recovery to follow. CWLA

brought Leiderman and Ernst together on a conference call to begin to discuss the immediate recovery needs of an organization and also the long-term rebuilding process. Leiderman offered not only to share information over the phone and through e-mail, including sending lists of relief organizations, but he also offered to fly to Iowa with several Kingsley House staff to assist Four Oaks.

“With a natural disaster you are impacted in so many ways. You lose your program buildings, your staff lose their homes, your clients lose their homes. Where do you do your work? How do you help your staff? How do you help your clients?” reflects Ernst. “Usually you assume a crisis will impact only one area, even something as tragic as a fire or a child death. But in a natural disaster you have to constantly circle around to how do you help everyone and when and how do you prioritize the help that needs to be given?”



Four Oaks, a CWLA member organization based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, prepared for flooding last summer. CWLA is developing a network to connect agencies dealing with unexpected crises with those who have been through similar experiences.

Ernst and Leiderman have continued to have conversations and share resource information. “It was invaluable to talk to someone who had been there before,” says Ernst. “He predicted that it would come at us all at once and he was right.” Leiderman suggested identifying needs and separating staff into groups. For example, one group figures out where to centralize program operations and return business functions, one group focuses on the needs of staff, such as housing and aid, and one group identifies how to find the clients that had lost their homes and their communications systems.

“Talking with Keith helped to normalize our situation,” says Ernst. “Three years later they are back, so it helps to

know that it can be done, to see an example of a successful organization.” Four Oaks is now working to secure replacement housing for 5,400 households with approximately 20,000 people. Ernst is part of a 10-person city recovery team, which initially met daily for several weeks and now meets twice a week for two hours to coordinate the community’s response and plan for the future. Ernst admits that the work has been overwhelming, but he continues to see opportunities. “We will end up with a better community,” says Ernst. “This gives us a chance to improve affordable housing, to create a human services campus, and to serve people better.”

The Impact of Experience

As Iowa continued to recover, the staff at Kingsley House in New Orleans faced the reality of hurricane season again when news of Hurricane Gustav’s approach was reported late last August. As the largest provider of adult day health services in the city, Kingsley House became a city-assisted evacuation site for senior citizens and people with medical needs. The process was very difficult for the community and the staff, and Leiderman reported that the impact of post-traumatic stress was evident. “There were 17 city-assisted evacuation sites and we all served as a place for planning and managing the traffic flow for buses and trains,” says Leiderman.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FOUR OAKS

In what became the largest evacuation ever in the United States, the staff at Kingsley House helped coordinate the successful movement of almost 2 million people. Citizens could not return for five to eight days, and many returned to wind- and

“We have learned that having strong relationships with the local media becomes even more important during a crisis. They can assist you in accurately telling your story to the community and helping people understand the real work that we do. Don’t hide; even when something bad happens in a program, there is an opportunity to build support through openness. Unless there has been malfeasance on the part of an employee, people want to understand the reality of the challenges in our work.”

*Jim Blue, President & CEO,
CEDARS Youth Services, Lincoln, Nebraska*

rain-damaged homes and businesses and a lack of power. “On our first day back though, we had 94 of our 120 staff at the staff meeting,” reports Leiderman. “They all came back and all of our programs [began] serving clients immediately.”

In comparison to the chaos of Hurricane Katrina, Leiderman said this was very structured and organized. “We’re still learning. The re-entry has been a little disorganized and we need full power restored so that those waiting can return, but we know now that we can do this,” he says. “We were also impressed by the goodwill and humanity of so many organizations that reached out to welcome people and to provide temporary shelter.” Leiderman’s own family stayed for the week at the summer camp his daughter attends with 125 other evacuated families in Mississippi.

These experiences, Leiderman says, have changed how he watches situations unfold in other places and how he wants to help. “You need to connect with people who have been through the same thing before. We certainly needed that after Katrina. There were people we talked to from Japan, people involved with 9/11, places where there had been massive devastation and a need for real long-term recovery,” says Leiderman. “Would I have felt any compelling need to reach out to Cedar Rapids without Katrina? No. But after what I’ve been through, I know that I can be helpful.”

Learning Which Questions to Ask

Pat Wilson, Commissioner for the Kentucky Department for Community Based Services, has also seen the opportunities that

have come from tragedy. Boni Frederick, a social service aide, was beaten and killed while supervising the home visit of an infant with his mother in October 2006. After coping with the immediate needs of those involved, there remained an overwhelming number of questions about worker safety in the media, the general public, and most importantly, among those working directly with clients in protective services.

“Where do you go?” questioned Wilson. “There wasn’t much available in the literature. We knew we didn’t have

The Department of Community Based Services developed several responses, including an overriding training theme for staff to constantly be aware of the threats around them as one of the most important things they could do to keep themselves safe. Teams inspected all of the offices and assessed the physical plants for safety features. Changes were made to receptionist areas as well as other areas to improve overall safety. “This was very significant,” says Wilson. “We are always looking at our space in terms of utilization, figuring out how to squeeze more



PHOTO COURTESY OF FOUR OAKS

the answers but we wanted to give other states an opportunity to put their questions on the table.” In October 2007, Kentucky hosted the first National Human Services Worker Safety Conference. More than 130 participants from 20 states attended, and topics included the use of technology and telecommunications, personal safety, self-defense, laws passed increasing penalties for crimes against human services workers, and experiences in other states. The response was positive and raised more questions: Where is the line between monitoring employees via GPS for safety and invading their privacy? What do you do in rural areas where cell phone reception may be unreliable or back-up a long distance away?

people in or reconfigure for another meeting room.... We started to look at everything with a new lens.”

A web-based critical threat reporting system was implemented allowing for expedited review and response to situations where worker safety had been compromised. Additionally, the new position of regional safety officers was created and Kentucky now has seven full-time safety officers who review critical incidents, examine operating procedures and physical space, evaluate training needs with supervisors, and serve as a sounding board for staff with safety concerns. Some of the positions have been filled with retired state police officers and others have backgrounds that qualify them for their new role.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FOUR OAKS

“What we most want to achieve is to train and teach our staff how to be as tuned in to their own safety as they possibly can,” says Wilson. “If you are in someone’s house and something goes wrong, you have to rely on yourself. So I want everyone to constantly pay attention, to have that so ingrained in their everyday behavior that they do it without thinking about it.”

Kentucky is continuing their work with the legislature and department officials as well as communicating with other states to share information. When caseworker Brenda Lee Yeager was brutally murdered in West Virginia last July, the commissioners of Kentucky and West Virginia were able to connect and talk about how to cope and how to respond moving forward. At CWLA’s annual Commissioner’s Roundtable, Wilson and West Virginia Commissioner Jason Najumlski were also able to talk with participants about coping with such tragedies.

Taking Time

Louise Richmond was the Assistant Executive Director at Saint Vincent’s Home in Fall River, Massachusetts, when her phone rang at 6:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning. With a granddaughter soon to arrive, she expected to hear her daughter on the phone. Instead, it was the morning staff person from the Independent Living Program. The overnight staff person was unresponsive and had died during the shift. Richmond immediately drove to the program site and called the CEO on her way.

“We determined that our best approach would be for the CEO to drive to agency headquarters to address the legal, licensing, and human resource issues and for me to focus on the needs of clients and staff in the program,” says Richmond. Working as a team, the program and administrative staff addressed the immediate needs.

“After several hours of settling down the program and making all necessary calls and preparations, I had gone to my car to go home when I got another call,” says Richmond. “Another one of our group homes was on fire and all nine clients were okay but had to be evacuated and placed in other homes.” Locating emergency placement for so many children required temporary license adjustments and other regulatory issues. “You can’t just move clients without caseworker approval and parental notification,” says Richmond. “And the clients had no personal items, so we had to locate everything from

toothbrushes to pajamas.” Richmond’s day started at 6:30 a.m. and ended at about 10 p.m., with all kids settled and placed in other agency facilities. Her granddaughter arrived safely the following Wednesday.

Now serving as CWLA’s New England Regional Director, Richmond reports that the lessons she learned from that day and many others are important in her work with CWLA members now. “It has been my experience that agency personnel rise to the occasion and are willing to pitch in and do whatever is asked of them, so don’t hesitate to ask,” says Richmond. “There are short-term interventions that need to happen and longer-term interventions that can wait for a day or two. A disaster plan that provides some guidance is a very useful tool and can serve as a starting point; from there, you have to rely on your team to put the plan into action.”

Moving Forward, Together

Every day, member organizations are faced with new challenges that require leaders to enact the plans they have developed and to seek new solutions. The opportunity to talk with others and to share resources is vital to moving through these challenges successfully. Leaders can learn from the experience of others and use that information to make the decisions that result in better services for children and families.

CWLA wants to work with members to share information throughout our network. As we develop formal systems we want to hear from you about the expertise you can share. Contact your regional director (see the list on page 37) to be included in our growing database of executives willing to serve as resources to other members. ■

Cindy Ryman Yost is the Director of Membership Development at CWLA. To learn more about getting involved with other CWLA members, contact her at 402/730-9275 or CRymanYost@CWLA.org.