

MEASURING CHILD WELL-BEING STATEWIDE



Illinois Department of
DCFS
Children & Family Services

Memorandum

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PROBLEM

Frontline workers, who tirelessly strive to meet the well-being needs of children, families, and communities, find themselves struggling to navigate the convoluted maze of state systems riddled with overlapping policies and practices. As one State of Illinois employee astutely observed, “We run them [children and families] around from service-to-service and agency-to-agency to get their needs met, but do we really know how any of this is impacting their lives as a whole?”

In Illinois, there is a limited understanding of child well-being and its outcomes among state agencies. The State Board of Education (ISBE), Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Department of Human Services (DHS), and Healthcare and Family Services (HFS) each define and measure the well-being of children, families, and communities differently. This results in a lack of standardized measures for well-being across agencies and inconsistent interpretation of well-being and its measures throughout the state. There is no statewide mechanism to ensure a comprehensive understanding of community well-being measures, efforts, or outcomes. This lack of alignment amplifies the complexities faced by frontline staff, leading to redundant practices, systemic barriers, and staff turnover. Without a universal approach to defining and measuring well-being, the State of Illinois is unable to demonstrate how the well-being of children, families, and communities change over time or evaluate how they are impacted by our programs and interventions.

In 2018, the federal government made a transformative shift toward prevention services when they signed the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) into law. This legislation aims to shift the culture of the Child Welfare system from child protection to child prevention services and DCFS¹ has changed their approach accordingly by shifting the focus to prevention services. Additionally, they have established a universal definition of well-being:

Well-being refers to overall health, happiness, and prosperity, encompassing various aspects of an individual's life. Moving toward and achieving one's concept of well-being is a lifelong journey, starting at birth lasting throughout the developmental progression. Well-being encompasses five domains: physical health and safety; education and cognitive health; social, emotional, and mental health; economic security; and racial and ethnic equity... To experience growth and build well-becoming, people need opportunities, resources, support, and relationships which help them meet their basic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and build the resiliency necessary to navigate life's adversities.¹

This definition does not exclusively apply to families in DCFS care; it applies to all individuals and families across programs and throughout the state of Illinois. In partnership with individuals with lived experiences, The Office of Research and Child Well-Being (ORCW) at Illinois DCFS identified the need for a statewide definition and consistent sets of domains and measures of well-being. If state agencies adopted such a framework, it would benefit all children, youth, families, and communities involved in state-sponsored interventions and services. The sentiments shared by individuals with lived experiences in Illinois aligns with the Family First Prevention Services Act, which encourages states to stand up a “21st Century Child Well-Being system” that focuses on engaging children and families before they enter systems of care as a preventative measure.

¹Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. (2023). Cultivating Well-Being, Well-Becoming, and Resiliency: The Office of Research and Child Well-Being's Equity-Centered Strength-Focused Approach.

In 2019, Governor J.B. Pritzker publicized his desire for Illinois to be “the best state in the nation for families raising young children,” which aligns with the aspirations of a 21st century child well-being system.² Since that time, the Governor has signed an Executive Order to establish a new state agency to oversee all early childhood programs in the state of Illinois.³ Adjacent to these efforts, in 2023, the Lieutenant Governor, Julia Stratton, established the Healing-Centered Illinois Task Force pursuant to Senate Bill 646.⁴ The task force centers its focus on state agencies and communities addressing trauma while focusing on individual and family strengths and prosocial behaviors, all of which impact well-being. While these initiatives mark positive steps toward unified programming there is more to consider before the new agency is established, and the healing-centered work is implemented statewide. The five domains of well-being are diverse and stretch across all systems to meet the needs of children and families. Measuring well-being creates an informed, responsive, and equitable approach to improving the overall quality of life for individuals and communities.

CAUSE

Currently, the state of Illinois lacks a collaborative and comprehensive approach to well-being due to a variety of factors, such as the absence of a shared lexicon, assessments, measures, data management system, and outcomes for child, family, and community well-being aimed at resolving common challenges and barriers. In addition, state agencies are required to report federal measures of well-being in different manners to federal governing bodies. This stands in stark contrast to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services⁵, which developed its first federal measure for overall well-being and published it in Healthy People 2030.⁶ The Overall Health and Well-Being Measure is a life satisfaction measure that focuses on the well-being of Americans aged 18 years and older from 2021 – 2022. This measure has a single definition, manner of assessment, and outcomes that set the stage for a cohesive and coordinated effort with a holistic approach across states. While the Department of Health and Human Services publicized its first measure of well-being, it exclusively measures the well-being of individuals 18 years and older, not individuals under the age of 18. Due to the life stages, diverse needs, and experiences of those under the age of 18, Illinois should prioritize the assessment, measurement, development of a shared language, and outcomes of well-being for children under the age of 18, followed by families and communities.

SOLUTION

As a state, Illinois needs to standardize the definition and measures of well-being that assists state agencies in developing a path forward in understanding the impact on child, family and community well-being and reduces the stress on the workforce to create environments of collective strength. The state’s journey toward defining, measuring, and achieving specific well-being indicators involves embracing diverse perspectives. This includes adopting an equity and inclusion framework that recognizes individuals from diverse backgrounds and agencies across the state to provide a rich tapestry of insights that encourages adaptability and innovation. As the state embraces new well-being definitions and indicators, state agencies and individuals with lived experiences will play a crucial role in defining and creating well-being indicators statewide. This approach enables the state to adopt a dynamic and responsive strategy that enhances collaboration, communication and the development of statewide standards that promote a collective commitment to well-being with an emphasis on inclusivity and collaboration.

²Gov. Pritzker Calls on Illinois to Become Best State in Nation for Families Raising Young Children. (2019, December 16). Illinois.Gov Press Releases. Retrieved December 9, 2023, from <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.20950.html>

³Gov. Pritzker Announces Proposal to Create Unified Early Childhood State Agency. (2023, October 24). Illinois.Gov Press Releases. Retrieved December 9, 2023, from <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.27179.html>

⁴Healing-Centered Illinois Task Force. (2023). Retrieved March 28, 2024, from <https://ltgov.illinois.gov/councils/hcitif.html>

⁵U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2023). *What is Lived Experience?* Retrieved December 19, 2023, from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/5840f2f3645ae485c268a2784e1132c5/What-Is-Lived-Experience.pdf>

⁶Healthy People 2030 is a document produced by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion that focuses on ways to improve individual, community and structural health challenges faced by Americans. Retrieved June 10, 2024, from <https://health.gov/healthypeople>.

It is imperative for the General Assembly to:

Establish a task force in the state of Illinois dedicated to defining and designing key child, family, and community well-being metrics for every state agency to use. This task force will include individuals from various state agencies and diverse individuals with lived experiences who have participated in government-sponsored services and supports.⁷ As part of the task force's efforts to develop crucial data points on well-being, the taskforce will focus on the following key objectives:

- Leverage the state's robust infrastructure for data management and production. The committee will capitalize on the state's existing capacities to develop a publicly available dashboard specifically centered around measures of child well-being, emphasizing the essential steps required to establish and maintain the dashboard.
- To enhance the usage and usability of the dashboard, a dedicated analytic approach will be employed for tasks such as collecting, evaluating, analyzing, translating, and identifying trends in child well-being data. The task force will make recommendations on allocation of resources to diverse communities.
- The allocation of resources is crucial to ensuring programs receive the necessary support, enabling them to function effectively and remain valuable; therefore, data on well-being will be shared with state agencies and policy makers along with benchmarks and goals to influence research and policy initiatives that benefit diverse communities. Then, the relevant government agency will incorporate and implement the recommendations of the task force.

OUTCOMES

Based on the proposed solution, the following outcomes are expected:

- The development of statewide measures of child well-being that are consistent and standardized establishes a foundation for future workforce development. A workforce that prioritizes the well-being of populations with less access to resources produces individuals with better cognitive, emotional, and social skills, thereby contributing to a more skilled and resilient workforce.
- The development of a statewide well-being definition and framework that is consistent and standardized.
- The inclusion of diverse individuals with lived experiences from various backgrounds, races, sexual orientations, genders, etc. in the development, planning, implementation, and ongoing efforts to establish a statewide framework and dashboard for well-being.
- The exchange of best practices and successful strategies that improve well-being across state agencies.
- The establishment of a statewide well-being dashboard and benchmarks.
- The ability to measure child, family, and community well-being over time, identify trends in well-being, and be responsive to events that have widespread impact on child, family, and community well-being (e.g., Covid-19, recessions, etc.)
- The recommendations of policies tailored to meet the specific and diverse well-being needs of children and families.

⁷The OHSP (2023) describes individuals with lived experience (ILEx) as those who are directly impacted by government-sponsored social programs. The insight of ILEx provides valuable information into how policies, practices, and programs impact end user and it is an opportunity to gather feedback that impacts system change.

Office of Human Services Policy (OHSP, 2023). What is Lived Experience? Washington, DC: US Department of Health & Human Services.



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