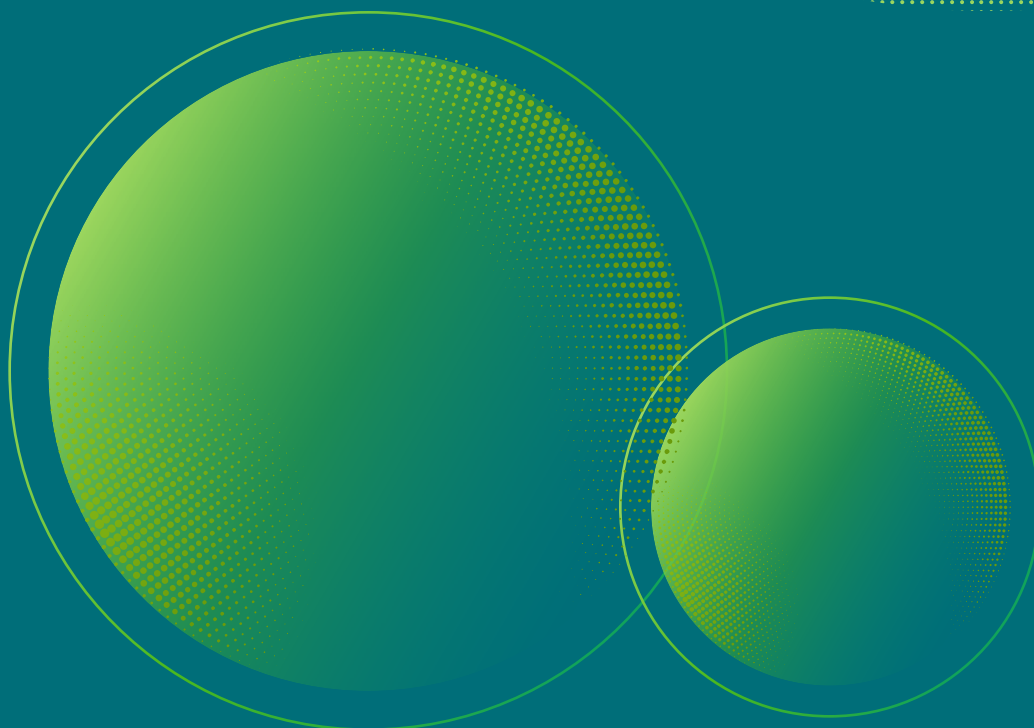# Deloitte.

Navigating the complexities of child welfare

Can technology help staff make critical decisions about the safety and wellbeing of our kids?

For many children and their families, involvement with the child welfare system can be a traumatic, affronting and heart-wrenching experience. For the social workers tasked with keeping children safe, every report or event also takes an emotional toll.

Each time, caseworkers are faced with complex questions: Is this child in danger? Is there any way I can keep this family together and the child safe? Will the child be safe with their parents, or should I find a foster home? Do we even have an appropriate foster home available?
Despite the demanding nature of the job, caseworkers strive and sometimes struggle to gather and analyze essential data to inform their decisions, often working with outdated systems that can hinder their efficiency and ability to quickly connect children and families with the services they need.

No one ever wants to be part of the child welfare system. But there's an important reason it exists and a profound calling for the people working in it.

In 2023, more than three million children were reported to protective services across the United States, most for suspected neglect. Less than half of those reports were referred for investigation. Still, the Administration for Children and Families estimated 2,000 children died from abuse and neglect that year.

In this conversation with Deloitte child welfare professionals Amy Grippi and Lauren Behsudi, we examine the challenges facing today's child welfare officials, including how to incorporate a responsible data and technology-driven approach into the work.

Behsudi, a Deloitte Consulting LLP manager advising government clients on such issues, previously served as a senior advisor for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and spent nearly 12 years before that advising federal, state and tribal policymakers on behalf of Casey Family Programs, the country's largest operating foundation focused on child welfare. Grippi, a Deloitte Consulting LLP senior manager, also served as a senior advisor for ACF, and was the executive director for child services at the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services.

What got you into human services and child welfare specifically?

Lauren Behsudi: Working for Casey (Family Programs), I had the opportunity to work with young people, parents, foster parents, and relative caregivers who had personal experience navigating the child welfare system. Their stories profoundly moved me, and I was honored to be able to collaborate with them to inform policymakers about what is working and the changes needed to improve their outcomes. I was especially proud of how our work informed the development, passage, and implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act, which provides critical shifts to how people can access critical prevention services to keep families safely together.

Amy Grippi: I interviewed for a job fresh out of college. I knew that protecting and keeping children safe was a purposeful and worthy goal. But I really didn't understand the gravity of this work until my first day. The individuals who work in the Child Welfare ecosystem are passionate about helping children and families and strengthening communities. They show up every day to support children and families through sometimes very traumatic situations, but the work is also extremely rewarding and the resilience of the families served is inspiring. When I started working at the macro level in both state and federal government agencies, I had the opportunity to lead initiatives that helped frontline workers do this work better, more efficiently, and objectively to improve outcomes for families.

There's been a lot of talk about the potential for GenAI to make the government more efficient. There's understandable skepticism, too. While they might be OK for the DMV, can automated processes and AI be used safely in a mission as sensitive as child welfare?

Amy Grippi: AI has the potential to add an objective lens in what is frequently a subjective situation. Technology, including AI, can provide crucial support to help inform this decision, lighten the caseworker's load, and improve outcomes for both frontline workers and the children they serve. AI and automations can aggregate and summarize large volumes of information, structure unstructured data, and handle administrative tasks like data entry and case management, freeing social workers to focus more time on human engagement. AI can also analyze data to identify patterns and risks, helping frontline workers prioritize cases and make quick, informed decisions.

Lauren Behsudi: Caseworkers and their colleagues hold a wealth of knowledge, but simple tasks can be unnecessarily difficult and time-consuming when using inadequate tools. Every family is complex in its own way, so it's critical to always have a human in the loop using clinical and professional judgment. But AI can synthesize large datasets that a human couldn't do without extensive time that isn't generally available. AI tools can help draw insights from years' worth of data, flag risks for consideration, extrapolate needs and identify relevant and individualized services for the caseworker's consideration.

What would an innovative technology solution look like in practice? Is there an example you can think of?

Amy Grippi: Many states are updating their technology to systems run on the cloud, which not only gives them a more powerful, higher-capacity platform, but it can also make it so they can add new tools when they become available. The goal of child welfare is to keep kids safe and support their permanency and well-being. Kids should be with their families whenever possible. How do we help workers achieve these goals? What must a worker do and what can be automated or streamlined to reduce the administrative burden? Innovations continue to advance, and we work closely with our clients on the most impactful use cases to support the workforce in meeting the needs of children and families.

Lauren Behsudi: For example, we helped to develop a tool that can help workers identify service needs based on completed clinical assessments and then populate relevant services available within the vicinity of the family's home within minutes instead of hours. Before, it could've taken days to research individualized services for all members of the family. Our team works with those in the field to understand their biggest challenges and develop innovations that will support this evolving and complex system.

Public servants working on behalf of child welfare face an incredibly demanding and emotionally taxing job. It's no wonder state agencies have a hard time recruiting people to do this job. What will it take to attract and retain qualified people for these roles?

Lauren Behsudi: Being a caseworker isn't just about making decisions; it's about providing support and creating a stable environment where children and families can flourish. Their work is crucial in closing gaps to get the best possible outcomes. But let's be real, the emotional burden and heavy caseloads can leave social workers feeling pretty burned out and exhausted. To keep them in the job, we have to listen to caseworkers when they tell us what they need to be successful in their role.

Amy Grippi: The people that work in child welfare are passionate about helping children and families. We need new creative strategies and places to recruit child welfare professionals. Different recruitment strategies and position requirements could also be considered for the different types of child welfare roles; for example, the skillset and training needed for prevention work may differ from an intake worker or investigator. Negative internal and external criticism influences organizational culture and can also make it hard to attract good people to this line of work. But sharing real-life stories can improve people's appreciation for the purpose of child welfare, beyond the statutory authority. I also believe that technology can help frontline workers do their jobs with even greater efficiency and accuracy, reducing workload and ultimately leading to better support for the children and families they're serving.

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