



How has stable, skilled leadership driven change in Allegheny County?

Q&A with Marc Cherna, Director, Allegheny County Department of Human Services¹

This Q&A with Marc Cherna, director of the Allegheny County (Pa.) Department of Human Services for more than 20 years, focuses on his leadership style. He discusses personal and organizational strategies that he prioritized to achieve his vision, and the importance of building a wide network of external relationships with community stakeholders.

How would you define your leadership style?

I would define it as “quirky” — it doesn’t fit neatly into any boxes of established leadership styles. I’ve learned more from experience but I still rely on real principles, such as **staying true to the values of how we treat people and never losing sight of who our real bosses are — the people we serve.** I try to lead by example and also not to let the perfect get in the way of the good. Doing the work and implementing change is the tough stuff. Rather than discuss issues forever, and delay things while waiting for perfection, **I take more of a “Ready. Fire. Aim” approach.** We have to get out and do it and then adjust as needed, rather than wait until it’s perfect. Our kids and families can’t wait.



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How did you develop your leadership style?

I've been in this business for 45 years and in senior management for 36 of them. When the governor of New Jersey asked me to be a part of the management team to fix the state's Division of Youth and Family Services, I thought I knew everything and, honestly, I was pretty arrogant. I quickly learned the hard way how little I really knew. Nothing is really black or white; it is all incredibly nuanced. For example, I used to be much harder on parents and thought that they were the problem. But I have learned that **the vast majority of parents love their kids and want to do what's right for them.** Problems and stresses of mental illness, poverty, and addictive diseases can get in their way, but they are not bad people.

I follow the maxim, "Do unto others and treat them as you would want to be treated." We must always ask: "What would I do if I was in that situation?" There's nobody who has not needed help at some time in his or her life. How would you want to be treated if you were on the other side, the one in need of support? And how would you feel if the people around you didn't respect or listen to you? **I try to build on parents' capabilities, help them get easier access to services, and really listen to them** instead of saying, "We, the agency, know what is best for you."

Can you share an example of your "Ready. Fire. Aim" approach and any instances when you might have had to course-correct?

We were the first out of the box with predictive analytics, developing the Allegheny County "go/no go" family screening tool. We spent a couple of years on a community process to help folks understand the tool and get buy-in, and make sure screening workers really

knew how to use it. However, in hindsight, I realized we could have spent more time working with the screeners to support early implementation. So we now meet every few weeks to constantly make tweaks as we discover things through practice that need to be improved.

Another example is family group decision making, which we implemented for quite a few years. Then, Chapin Hall did an independent evaluation and found that while families liked the approach, it made absolutely no difference in placement rates and was very expensive to implement, so we weren't getting the bang for our buck. Instead, we looked at a more universal approach of Conferencing and Teaming that could reach more people more quickly and was cheaper.

What were you tasked with when you first started in Allegheny County?

Fix it! County leaders at that time were desperate to have someone to do this work, but it wasn't a top priority. The county had a large, bipartisan search committee, and I used it to help create my initial "kitchen cabinet" of support and backing. I relied on engagement with the people who have substantive decision-making power in the community rather than just those elected officials who were focused on meeting the budget or keeping out of the newspaper.

New leaders often work on the internal agency stuff, but it is even more important to do both the internal and external work right from the start. **Working with the community and building relationships is critical.** Engagement is key to lasting longer in this position. I was willing to meet with anybody who was willing to meet with me, seven days a week — community groups, consumers — to listen to their venting. Allegheny County child welfare was known as a national disgrace. But I

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the child welfare, drug and alcohol, delinquency, and homeless systems. There are so many parents we hire to help other parents negotiate the system, and we also hire people in recovery or who have mental illness to help those with similar issues get services. We hire those who were in the criminal justice system to help inmates with reentry, and we have formerly homeless individuals working directly with homeless shelters. While others may do something similar, to a smaller degree, in Allegheny County it is widespread and infused in everything we do — and it makes a huge impact.

Have you used certain strategies to get the word out about what you are doing?

We have a **strong community relations approach**, what I call our “propaganda machine.” We are constantly out in the community selling ourselves and trying to get good press. We host special events, fundraisers, an annual music festival, and even a comedy night where people running for election have to tell jokes. These are good ways to talk about some positive things we do and engage with members of the community so that they are not just hearing about us when a child dies. We go into the communities where we get a lot of our business from or where people want us to come talk, and we do it all the time. Pretty much, if someone invites me, I’m there!

We have also created a website, [Allegheny County Analytics](#), to get our message out about the impact our work is having. And we rely on feedback from different places. We have a complaint line called the Director’s Action Line, or DAL. **Now, community members have more confidence that their voices will be heard and the issues they raise will be addressed.** In fact, when a constituent calls a reporter to complain, the first thing the reporter will now ask is whether the person has

called the DAL and suggest that the person go through that first. Legislators have a pipeline to the DAL. The DAL goes to our community relations team, and they respond.

We’ve also held quarterly Children’s Cabinet meetings for years to get input from current and former consumers, advocates, private agencies, judges, insurance company heads, and others. It is a big, diverse group. We never give assignments or set up assigned work. Instead, we really want to engage people. We’ll say, “Here’s what we’re thinking about ... what do you think? We need your advice for how best to roll this stuff out. We want your input; you are important.”

Did you make changes in your organizational structure?

In the beginning, we had six child welfare offices in Allegheny County and were asked to create an umbrella Department of Human Services capturing all former departments providing social services. So we went out into the community and asked people what they would like to see if we could build the system from scratch. They told us that they were often involved in multiple systems and just wanted to be able to tell their stories once, have one caseworker, and be served where they live by people they trust. We had a lot of community input, then put out a draft of what we thought we heard from community members and asked for more of their comments.

As a result of this community input, **we created a centralized, integrated system.** All program offices are under one person, so we don’t have silos, and consumers are not put in boxes. Program offices have to be interrelated and can’t operate independently. **Silos**

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don't work. A person can enter our system anywhere. For example, in the child welfare offices, we have nurses, kinship navigators, and specialists in mental health, addiction, housing, intimate partner violence, father engagement, transportation, and other resources. They form a team with the family's caseworker. The family has a conference to determine what is needed, and then the team comes together to figure out how to best provide the family with those services. Sometimes this means negotiating among ourselves. For instance, if a parent needs drug treatment, the team can decide to move the parent to the top of the list if that will help keep that family's children safe at home.

What often happens is that those of us in child welfare want to do what we do, but can't get other public sector colleagues to cooperate because the service system is so siloed. Everyone wants positive outcomes but there is no magic bullet. If it was easy, we'd have it completely solved. System transformation and integration is difficult and complex. But I am a real proponent of county- and neighborhood-based systems because that's where the action is. And there are other human service departments that are also making good strides. They have housing, health, child welfare, mental health, and substance abuse treatment all combined to bring services together for families through one access door.

At DHS, we've also brought 100 funding sources together. We serve the people first and then figure out how to pay for it. One of my strengths is how to budget and finance to maximize available resources. We get

foundation support along with state and federal grants, and we work collaboratively with Medicaid from the behavioral health side. **We have also invested heavily in prevention work.** We have 28 family support centers, and parents are our best recruiters. We are working on a prevention model using our predictive analytics, which we will roll out in 2019. The goal is to help families from birth, engage before a child is hurt, and help prevent child fatalities.

Do you have any tips for new child welfare leaders?

Relationships are everything. Build relationships with elected officials, the community, including the non-traditional folks — folks who can help and support what you do. **Whole community engagement should be prioritized.** Develop relationships with the private sector and corporations. For example, the Chamber of Commerce gave us *pro bono* assistance and shared with local foundations our need for a data warehouse, which they then funded. We have a law firm that does *pro bono* adoptions for us each year. Through these types of partnerships and philanthropy, as well as real community engagement, the people now "own" child welfare — they own the approach, they champion what we're doing, they're behind it all. So when a new administration comes in, it can't easily be undone. All of these partners and community members won't want to change what they have all built together.

1. Adapted from interview with Marc Cherna, October 4, 2018.

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