

Case Study for the Child Welfare Study to Enhance Equity with Data (CW-SEED)

Talbot County, Maryland, Department of Social Services

Josie Gemignani, Alex Coccia, Jill Spielfogel, Macy Miller, Elizabeth Weigensberg, and Roseana Bess

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Overview

The Department of Social Services (DSS) in Talbot County, Maryland—a predominantly rural community on the state’s Eastern Shore—has worked to understand and identify inequities in its child welfare system by analyzing the racial and ethnic makeup of the children and families it serves and by gathering equity-related feedback from staff and community partners. DSS uses the following data practices:

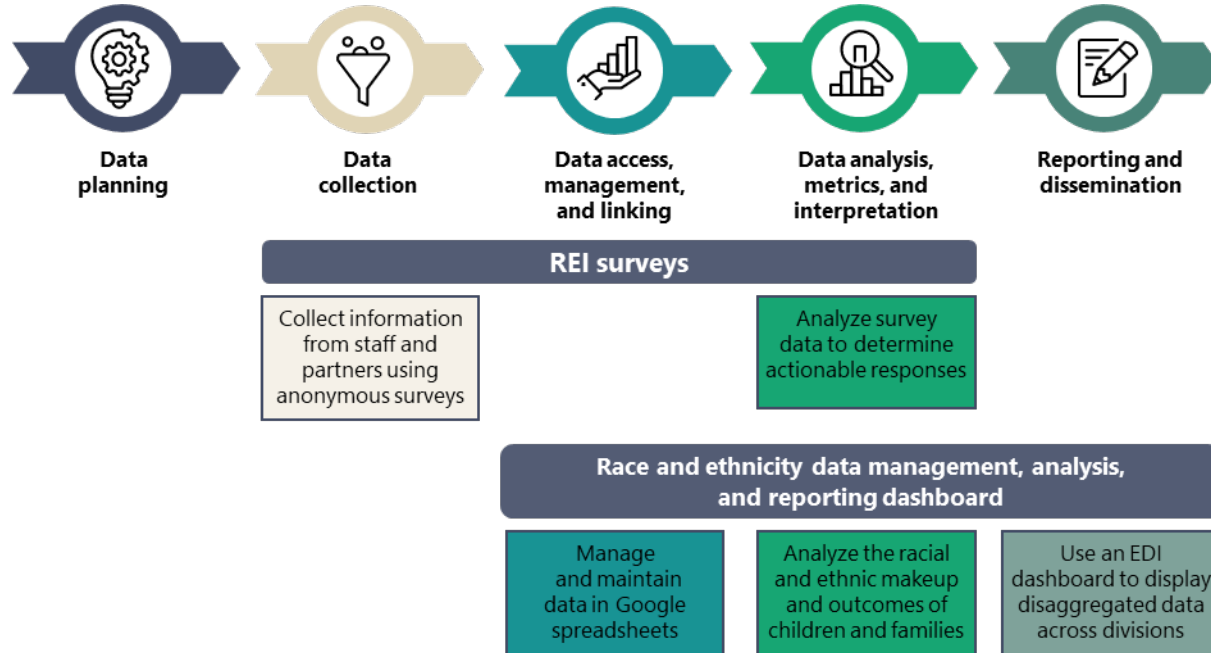
- **Race and ethnicity data management, analysis, and reporting dashboard.** DSS compiles and analyzes race and ethnicity information on children and families they serve, including those involved in investigations, receiving in-home services, and placed in foster care. Staff maintain this information in Google spreadsheets. They are in the process of developing an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Dashboard, a PDF file containing charts and graphs that shows disaggregated race data for key measures within each child welfare division. At the time of data collection for the case study, they produced their first iteration of the dashboard which had been shared with a DSS Equity Committee and an advisory board.
- **Racial Equity and Inclusion (REI) surveys.** DSS conducts annual surveys with all agency staff and their community partners to understand equity within the agency. The REI staff survey collects staff perspectives on agency-wide equity initiatives and the agency’s ability to identify and address inequities. The community partner survey gathers feedback about DSS performance on equity and existing gaps in services. Data from the surveys are reviewed to determine opportunities for improvements.

Box 1. About this case study

This case study is part of a series of case studies that showcase approaches for advancing equity in child welfare agencies through data-driven approaches. Each case study highlights major components of an agency’s approach—including, the data practices used, their equity-based features, and where they fall on the continuum of child welfare services. Agencies in the series represent a diverse range of data practices, geographies, community contexts, focal populations, and service environments. The case studies were conducted as part of the Child Welfare Study to Enhance Equity with Data (CW-SEED) project, sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in collaboration with the Children’s Bureau, both in the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The CW-SEED project is led by Mathematica in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Social Policy, and the University of North Carolina School of Social Work. ▲

As shown in Figure 1, these data practices mainly occur during four stages of the data life cycle: (1) data collection; (2) data access, management, and linking; (3) data analysis, metrics, and interpretation; and (4) reporting and dissemination.

Figure 1. Where DSS data practices fall in the data life cycle¹



Note: This figure shows the areas of the data life cycle that are of interest for this case study. Talbot County’s data practices may have also touched on other areas of the data life cycle.

DSS began administering the REI staff survey in 2021, analyzing the data for the EDI Dashboard in December 2023, and adding equity-focused questions to the community partner survey in fiscal year 2024. Although these data practices are in the early stages of development, case study respondents plan to build on this foundational work to improve equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families in the child welfare system.

This case study describes how a small child welfare agency is working toward promoting equity in its system. In addition to describing DSS equity data practices, it also provides information about Talbot County’s community context and equity goals; facilitators of and barriers to implementing the data practices; and opportunities for furthering data practices that enhance equity. Talbot County provides an important example of how even smaller child welfare agencies can use data to support their equity work. This case study illustrates where similar agencies that are interested in equity work could begin.

¹ More information about the data life cycle can be found in [“Using Data to Enhance Equity in Child Welfare: Findings from an Environmental Scan, OPRE Report #2024-083”](#) (Gemignani et al. 2024).

Community context

Jurisdiction characteristics

Talbot County is located along Maryland's Eastern Shore (Figure 2).

Box 2. Key terms defined by the CW-SEED project

Data are information collected about individuals and families that come into contact with the child welfare system. Data include information about age, gender identity, disability, race/ ethnicity, and descriptive information such as how a household is structured or the events that led to a child's placement in out-of-home care. In this study, we are particularly interested in data or information that can help assess and address equity—or inequities—in the child welfare system at the local level.

Data practices include all activities that involve data, including data planning, collection, access, and analysis; use of statistical tools and algorithms; and data reporting and dissemination.

Disparity refers to the unequal outcomes of one group compared with outcomes for another group (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2021).

Disproportionality is the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a particular group when compared with its percentage in the general population (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2021).

Equity is the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons; Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; LGBTQI+ persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality. This definition is consistent with President Biden's Executive Order 13985, Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (White House 2021). ▲

Figure 2. Location of Talbot County, Maryland



In July 2023, Talbot County had a total population of 37,823 (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). The county is primarily rural and contains five incorporated towns: (1) Easton, (2) Oxford, (3) Queen Anne, (4) St. Michaels, and (5) Trappe. Each town has its own elected form of government (Talbot County 2024). Maryland's child welfare agency is state-administered and includes 24 local agencies. Talbot County's DSS includes the following programs (also referred to as departments): Child Welfare, Child Support, Adult Services, Family Investment, Human Resources, and Finance and Contracting.

Seventy-six percent of Talbot County's population identifies as White, 12.8 percent identifies as Black or African American, 7.9 percent identifies as Hispanic or Latino, 2.2 percent identifies as multiracial, and 1.5 percent identifies as Asian (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). According to the county's 2022 Racial Equity Systems Analysis report, Black families are at higher odds of being investigated for child maltreatment and Black children are overrepresented in out-of-home placement and are less likely to be reunified with their parents than White children (Smith and Bragg 2022).

Child welfare demographic information. Given the small size of Talbot County, the child welfare agency

has few children under its care. Staff reported conducting about five investigations on average per month.

Annually since 2021, about 15 families receive in-home services and about 20 children are in out-of-home placement (Smith and Bragg 2022). About five of these children were placed in group homes or residential treatment, while the remainder were in foster home placements (kin and non-kin placements) (Smith and Bragg 2022).²

Motivation

Talbot County DSS views its efforts to advance equity with data as foundational to building excellence as a public-serving agency. By institutionalizing equity work, DSS staff aim to better serve their community. In 2022, DSS conducted a systems data analysis to locate where disparities occur along the child welfare continuum of services and to identify opportunities to monitor data and improve equity. The analyses suggested that families of color were overrepresented in the agency's caseloads across programs. Although Black residents comprise about 12 percent to 13 percent of the county's residents, they represent about half of the agency's caseload in child welfare (Smith and Bragg 2022).

“Ultimately ... our goal is to be able to engage with all individuals whom we serve in a way that supports them in the way that they need, not the way we're comfortable.”

—DSS leader

Equity goal and desired results

As a result of the systems analysis, DSS leaders worked to educate staff and follow the recommendations from the systems data analysis to address and enhance equity (Smith and Bragg 2022). One recommendation included presenting data by race and ethnicity to better understand the makeup of the population they serve, and to use that data to assess the extent to which Black and Latinx children are over- or under-represented, especially in out-of-home placement. The systems analysis also helped identify agency goals and engage staff at all levels and across departments in equity work, with a primary goal of effectively engaging families and providing services that adequately meet their individual needs. Also, some DSS leaders and staff are engaged in an Equity Coalition, hosted by the Talbot Family Network (TFN), a network of community partners they frequently collaborate with on equity initiatives. As the Local Management Board for Talbot County, TFN receives annual funding from the State of Maryland's Children's Cabinet which can be re-granted to County partners, such as DSS. An equity grant from TFN is supporting DSS in developing an equity statement, which will be shared with the community to promote shared accountability in January 2025. Additionally, DSS continues to expand upon their definition of equity; they started by focusing on racial and ethnic equity but have plans to include additional dimensions of equity such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression; socioeconomic status; disability and neurodiversity; and citizenship.

More broadly, the state child welfare agency, Maryland Social Services Administration (SSA), aims to strengthen the conversation about race and ethnicity data collection and analysis so disparities are known and addressed, and appropriate services can be implemented. As Box 3 discusses in more detail, SSA provides local child welfare agencies quarterly reports of local and statewide data. These reports have been partially disaggregated by race and ethnicity since 2021, in response to county requests for this information. DSS leaders hope this equity work will allow staff to identify and understand who they serve and help build partnerships with community organizations, such as the Chesapeake Multicultural

² As noted below in our discussion of the implementation challenges, the small population of children and families limits DSS's ability to conduct analyses related to disproportionality.

Resource Center, which provides responsive services in the community, including for children in immigrant families, some of whom are engaged with the child welfare system.

Box 3. Maryland quarterly reports

Background. For Maryland's Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), SSA developed statewide "headline" data indicators to share with local child welfare agencies. The local agencies, including Talbot County, use the data before CFSR on-site reviews and to develop their continuous quality improvement plans. Quarterly reporting by SSA to local agencies began in 2018.

Motivation. Several jurisdictions had asked SSA to provide information about the race and ethnicity of the children in care and permanency outcomes. SSA began providing some indicators disaggregated by race and ethnicity in the quarterly reports in 2021.

Report development. To develop the reports, the University of Maryland receives data from SSA mid-month every month, which they aggregate and de-identify. The data are then shared with Chapin Hall to produce the quarterly reports. It takes about 30 to 45 days after the data are sent to the university to produce a report. These quarterly reports, which are sent to the local agency directors, assistant directors, and supervisors in PDF format, contain visual representations of the headline indicators.

Data elements and visualization. The headline indicators include safety, health, maltreatment, and family preservation data. The race and ethnicity data are aggregated over a 12-month period. The reports include trends over five years that local agencies can view.

Report use. SSA leaders find these quarterly reports valuable because they are incorporated into CFSR meetings. If local agencies use the data in their continuous improvement plan, they examine that data as part of their six-month review hearings. Sharing statewide data with local agencies allows them to track their progress against their peers. The quarterly reporting also illustrates the importance and value of data collection on race and ethnicity. Some local agencies have used the data to identify a goal of reducing entry rates. Data quality in the quarterly reports has improved over time because staff have updated data fields when requested to improve the completeness of the data. ▲

Race and ethnicity data management, analysis, and reporting via the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Dashboard

To identify and analyze inequities, DSS (1) uses Google spreadsheets to compile, maintain, and analyze race and ethnicity information on children, youth, and families in care and (2) creates an EDI Dashboard that visually displays disaggregated race data for key measures within each child welfare division.

Description of the data practices

1. Compiling and managing data using spreadsheets

Data planning. When developing the dashboard, DSS leaders deferred to the discretion of the assistant directors and unit supervisors but encouraged them to consider decision-making points that may be vulnerable to bias. Supervisors and other staff drew from equity trainings with community partners and internal equity trainings focused on facilitating honest conversations about race and equity issues to help determine the data that (1) they had access to and (2) would be useful to interpret. These trainings were crucial to fostering staff comfort with identifying, understanding, and addressing racial disparities across the child welfare continuum.

Compiling the data. DSS utilizes a Google spreadsheet to manage child welfare information that feeds into the dashboard. The spreadsheet is maintained by the DSS Assistant Director of Administration (ADA) and updated regularly. Supervisors from several units and programs share data, including for (1) out of home (foster care), (2) in home (and substance-related cases), (3) child protective services (CPS), and (4) parent education and respite. Parent education is the Nurturing Parent Program, which is an evidence-informed program designed to increase positive parenting skills (Gross et al. 2022; Greeno et al. 2021;

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services 2018). A supervisor from each of these units manages a Google spreadsheet for their respective unit and manually enters the data. Supervisors input demographic information, including race and ethnicity, from the state's case management information system—the [Child, Juvenile, and Adult Management System \(CJAMS\)](#) (Maryland Department of Human Services n.d.).

Race and ethnicity data found in CJAMS are typically collected during the intake process, as DSS intake workers are required to ask reporters about families' race and ethnicity. DSS intake workers receive training during onboarding that covers data collection during screening and discusses the importance of collecting race and ethnicity data. Caseworkers may also follow up with families during investigation or post-intake if the race or ethnicity data are unclear, although a standardized practice to ask all families to confirm their race and ethnicity based on what was reported during intake is not currently in place. However, DSS supervisors noted that CJAMS has limited race and ethnicity data fields that are not inclusive to the populations they serve, as some of the families they serve do not identify with any of the available options.

CJAMS offers the following nine race and ethnicity options and workers can select all that apply: (1) Abandoned, (2) Alaskan Native, (3) American Indian, (4) Asian, (5) African American/Black, (6) Declined, (7) Native Hawaiian, (8) Pacific Islander, (9) White/Caucasian. CJAMS also includes the following ethnicity options: (1) Abandoned, (2) Declined, (3) Hispanic or Latino, (4) Not Hispanic or Latino, (5) Unknown. As there are a finite number of categories, families may select options that are not reflective of their self-identified race or ethnicity. Thus, DSS supervisors may enter more specific race and ethnicity information into their spreadsheets than what is provided in CJAMS. For example, they may enter a race or ethnicity that is not an option in CJAMS but reflects how a family self-identifies.

The DSS ADA pulls data from the supervisors' spreadsheets into the main spreadsheet. Each of these units represent one tab in the main Google spreadsheet. Data are de-identified in the main Google spreadsheet. Currently, Out of Home and Parent Education/Respite are the only child welfare-related units that track both race and ethnicity data. The data elements that are disaggregated by race in the EDI Dashboard are described in Box 4.

Box 4. EDI Dashboard data visualizations

The EDI Dashboard includes four child welfare–related graphs and charts that depict the following measures by category and by race:

- CPS type of maltreatment (indicated findings)
- Average number of out-of-home placement changes
- Number of substance-exposed newborn cases
- Number of parent education/respite cases ▲

Table 1. EDI Dashboard tabs and data elements

CPS (investigations)	In home (substance-related cases)	Out of home (foster care)	Parent education/respite
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maltreatment type Case head race Maltreater race Victim(s) race Investigation finding Criminal charges (Y/N) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Race Substance use type Treatment (Y/N) Type of treatment Opened Closed Closure status Safety plan Days open 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Race/ethnicity Number of placement changes since most recent removal episode Type of previous placement Current placement type 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Race Ethnicity Gender Age Town where the family resides Case type Date referral received Referral status

Note: Race and ethnicity are currently collected as either one or two separate data elements, depending on the unit. DSS leaders are determining whether to uniformly track race and ethnicity as the same or different categories.

The units include slightly different data elements in their tabs, as shown in Table 1³, and reflect data DSS are planning to assess to identify potential areas of disparities⁴:

- CPS.** DSS tracks the type of maltreatment, the races of alleged perpetrators of maltreatment, races of alleged child maltreatment victims, the outcome of the investigation, and whether the investigation results in criminal charges. These data are collected at the point of investigation. A CPS supervisor is hoping to use these data to assess disparities in investigation results and/or criminal charges—for example, whether alleged perpetrators of maltreatment who are Black are more likely to be charged with⁵ child maltreatment than White alleged perpetrators or whether people accused of child maltreatment are more likely to be charged based on the race of the victim. If disparities in investigative outcomes and criminal charges are revealed, DSS also hopes to share this knowledge with partners in law enforcement and the state attorney’s office to initiate equity conversations concerning decisions about charging and prosecution.
- In-home services (substance-related cases).** A DSS in-home supervisor focuses on cases that involve substance use, as some families with in-home cases also struggle with substance use, and assesses whether cultural factors impact parents’ decisions to seek treatment. In this tab, DSS tracks the race of the individual and data related to families receiving in-home services including the type of substance use, whether they are receiving treatment and treatment type⁵, date of in-home services case opening and closure, case closure status, safety plan details, and how many days the case has been open for. The in-home supervisor explained that, because DSS requires parents to participate in substance use treatment before the agency will consider reducing its oversight and

“We [need] to be creative, meet the family where they are, understand that not all families are going to subscribe to traditional forms of treatment, and know which families those are.”

—DSS supervisor

³ The EDI Dashboard also contains two tabs related to adult protective services. We did not report on these divisions for the case study.

⁴ Small sample sizes in this county may pose challenges to this analysis.

⁵ This legal terminology is consistent with how DSS referred to it.

involvement with families, it is important that DSS refer them to culturally appropriate service providers who can help them succeed in treatment.

- **Out-of-home services (foster care).** Talbot County's 2022 systems analysis indicated that children and youth of color were less likely to be placed with relatives or fictive kin (non-relatives that have a close relationship with the child) and more likely to be placed in institutionalized settings (Smith and Bragg 2022). Therefore, a DSS foster care supervisor suggested tracking the race and ethnicity of youth when they enter foster care, the number of placement changes since the most recent removal episode, types of previous placements, and current placement type. They thought this could be a useful way to assess whether the disparities were possibly related to biases or insufficient efforts from DSS staff.

Maintenance of the spreadsheets. DSS supervisors have been entering data into their respective Google spreadsheets since July 2023 and track case progress using the spreadsheets on a regular basis. The timing of these updates varies by data elements (such as when an investigation is closed or a foster care placement change occurs). The DSS ADA, who oversees the main Google spreadsheet, reviews the data regularly and reaches out to the supervisors if data entries appear incomplete or unclear.

2. Creating the EDI Dashboard

Displaying data via the EDI Dashboard. In December 2023, DSS began developing the first draft of the EDI Dashboard. Using data from the unit supervisors' spreadsheets, the DSS ADA disaggregates the data and creates graphs that depict the racial makeup of children and families in care for key measures within each division (specified above). The executive team has reviewed the dashboard and used it to prompt agency discussion about improvements to data collection efforts, such as including messaging on the importance of race data collection during staff training on intake screening.

Assessing data quality and grounding in equity

Because race and ethnicity data are not always captured at intake and because the fields in CJAMS for race and ethnicity are not mandatory (i.e., staff can select 'abandoned' to indicate that the data is missing), DSS staff noted that missing data sometimes impacted the quality of the data in the EDI Dashboard. To address this, staff noted that continuous training would help keep the importance of collecting race and ethnicity data directly from families front and center.

Analysis and progress toward goals

As a small county with few children and youth in foster care, Talbot County has been able to suggest initial areas where there may be existing disparities and adapt by determining which data are best to collect to evaluate their observations. DSS staff indicated that the EDI Dashboard is a "work in progress" and it is currently being refined to identify areas of disparities. One DSS staff member indicated that the conversations about which data to collect are open and evolving questions: "These data points are not locked in for the year. It's a live dashboard, so we can look at and begin collecting data for other data points at any time."

"The purpose [of the EDI Dashboard] is multipronged: To gather information and help staff understand there are decision points across programs where bias can creep in and to get engagement in [the] executive leadership and management team in the equity discussions.... In a perfect world, we would see no disparity, but preliminarily we know that isn't true."

—DSS leader

Supervisors, who decide which data to collect, also evaluate data collection and make adjustments when needed. For example, one supervisor shifted from looking at data on substance-exposed newborn cases to substance use in general to see if there was a trend in White families seeking treatment more often than Black families.

Dissemination, feedback, and improvement

Leaders plan to share the EDI Dashboard with agency staff

At the time of the case study, the EDI Dashboard was not publicly available nor accessible to staff. However, DSS leaders had shared it with the Equity Committee, a committee of DSS staff who oversee all DSS EDI-related efforts, and an advisory board. The advisory board recommended looking at quarterly trends. As a result, DSS has begun to look at year-to-date numbers, rather than monthly, to better identify trends. While some unit and program supervisors were involved in the development of the EDI Dashboard, the EDI Dashboard was disseminated to the entire agency as a PDF document in spring 2024 during an all-staff meeting. After reviewing the dashboard, staff participated in small discussions by program unit to answer the following questions:

1. What surprised you and why?
2. How can we use this information in our work and our workplace?
3. What else do you want to know?

Each group reported out on their discussion to DSS leadership. DSS is currently working on adding targeted data elements to the EDI dashboard based on these discussions.

Racial Equity and Inclusion surveys

DSS conducts two annual surveys to better understand equity within the agency and community: (1) the REI staff survey is completed with all agency staff and (2) the community partner survey is completed with community partners.

Description of the data practices

1. The REI staff survey

For the past three years, DSS has administered an anonymous REI survey to all DSS employees on their knowledge of equity issues and their perspectives on agency-wide equity initiatives. The most recent REI survey was sent to all 63 DSS employees in December 2023 and was completed by 47 employees. Equity-focused questions in the REI staff survey are summarized in Box 5.

Box 5. Equity-related questions in the REI staff survey

The REI staff survey is entirely focused on equity and includes questions such as the following:

- I understand why it is valuable to examine and discuss the impacts of race on our work in this agency (response options are a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree)
- I know how to identify examples of institutional racism (i.e., when organizational programs or policies work better for White people than for people of color) (response options are a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree)
- I know how to identify examples of interpersonal/individual racism (i.e., using coded language, questioning someone's competence based on their race or ethnicity) (response options are a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree)
- This agency provides the resources necessary for addressing racial disparities and achieving racial equity (response options are a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree)
- Would you recommend any racial equity/inclusion training you have completed as an organization-wide training? If so, please list the name/title/trainer (narrative response)
- In your own words, what do you think a focus on racial equity and inclusion should mean for the agency mission and how you work? What should the agency do more/less of? What would need to change? (narrative response) ▲

Designated DSS staff administer the REI survey through an agency-wide email that (1) describes the purpose of the survey and the value of obtaining staff input into equity-related issues and (2) includes the Google Form link to access the survey. During the three to four weeks the survey is open, DSS leaders send email reminders to encourage staff to participate. They also provide verbal reminders about the survey and reiterate its importance during staff meetings. To ensure that confidentiality is protected, DSS does not identify responses by program area or unit and restricts access to the survey data to DSS's Director, survey administrator, and ADA. DSS also removes the names of any staff who are mentioned before sharing survey results.

Once the survey link is closed, the DSS lead creates reports from the data, which are available for staff to review. One report contains the raw data and narrative responses; another includes graphs to visually display staff responses and changes in responses over time. The DSS executive leadership, management,

and performance and quality improvement (PQI) teams review results, collect feedback from staff, and track areas where actionable responses can be implemented.

2. Community partner survey

DSS sends an annual anonymous survey to about 146 community partners. These community partners include entities such as public and private school systems, local courts and law enforcement, behavioral health organizations, faith-based organizations, and other organizations providing human services in the community. The survey helps the agency evaluate the quality of its services and whether it successfully partners with local organizations. It also allows them to obtain feedback on strengths, gaps in services, and areas for improvement. To align their community partner work with their vision of integrating equity into everything they do, DSS staff added equity-focused questions to the 2024 fiscal year iteration of the survey (Box 6).

Box 6. Equity-related questions in the 2024 community partner survey

DSS integrated multiple equity-focused questions into its 2024 community partner survey, including the following:

- DSS does not discriminate in the provision of its services (response options are a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree)
- DSS demonstrates its commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion through community engagement and service delivery (response options are a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree)
- Identify any accessibility issues confronting our customers (i.e., agency hours, agency location, limited English language proficiency, supports/accommodations for persons with special needs) (narrative response) ▲

DSS distributes the community partner surveys by emailing a Google Forms survey link to all partners. After the community partner survey has closed, tabulation of the survey results is completed through Google Forms. The DSS executive leadership, management, and PQI teams review the results and track areas where actionable responses can be implemented. Results from the survey are shared with agency staff and community partners.

Developing and conducting the surveys

While developing the equity surveys, DSS borrowed similar surveys from partner agencies or local departments and tailored them to better meet the agency's specific needs.

- To develop the REI staff survey, DSS first piloted a survey with their leadership team that was determined to be too lengthy and likely to hinder participation. To be responsive to leadership team feedback, DSS used a staff survey from the Talbot Family Network as a template to shorten their survey and simplify the language and this iteration was disseminated to DSS staff.
- To develop the community partner surveys, DSS utilized a pre-existing survey from another local department and revised it to make it DSS specific. They also added questions related to equity.

DSS evaluates the questions in both surveys every year and determines what modifications to make based on which data they intend to capture before sending them out to staff and community partners. DSS also works with its Equity Committee to make adjustments and ensure affirming language.

Assessing data quality and grounding data in equity

DSS respondents did not indicate concerns about data quality or integrity related to the REI staff and community partner surveys but noted a desire for higher response rates. The fiscal year 2024 community partner survey response rate was 51 percent, and the 2023 REI staff survey response rate was about 75 percent.⁶

Although the REI survey response was in line with what DSS leaders expected to see for a voluntary survey, they are considering offering staff incentives to complete future surveys to increase participation.

Analysis and progress toward goals

Survey data will be used to identify areas of improvement and develop action plans. Because these survey initiatives are fairly new, DSS is still establishing methods to use the survey data to inform short- and long-term plans to address equity and improve service provision. Thus far, survey results appear to suggest that the surveys are a promising approach to supporting their equity goals: DSS leaders indicated that the recent inclusion of equity-related questions in their community partner survey prompted the most comprehensive feedback they ever received and encouraged partners to reflect on inequities impacting their community. For example, some community partner responses flagged specific communities that need to be served with more intention and provided suggestions for how to do so. Additionally, DSS leaders said that their most recent round of the REI staff survey showed significant increases to “agree” and “strongly agree” responses from staff in several measures, including (1) “I have the tools to address institutional racism in my workplace,” (2) “The agency provides the resources necessary for addressing racial disparities in achieving racial equity,” (3) “This agency has taken steps to reduce racial inequities internally,” and (4) “This agency is committed to racial equity.”

Eventually, the DSS leadership and PQI teams could use the data from the REI staff and community partner surveys to track progress toward equity-related goals over time, revisit and update policies as needed, and potentially implement program changes.

Dissemination, feedback, and improvement

Findings from REI staff and community partner surveys are disseminated annually. REI staff survey results are first reviewed by the DSS executive leadership and management teams and then the PQI team. After the PQI team completes its review, the results are provided to unit supervisors and unit Performance Improvement Team facilitators, who then share them with their teams and hold discussions about the results. Unit supervisors and unit Performance Improvement Team facilitators gather feedback from these discussions and report back to the PQI team, which maintains and tracks actionable areas from the REI surveys. The community partner survey results are reported for the current year and will also be used to conduct comparative analyses over time. The results are disseminated to staff throughout DSS via an

Box 7. Equity-related questions in the customer satisfaction survey

In addition to the two surveys featured in this case study, DSS administers a survey to their customers across all departments that includes questions, such as:

- The agency provided services to me in my preferred language (response options are a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree)
- DSS provided services in a fair and equitable manner (response options are a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree) ▲

⁶ The REI survey response rate is considerably high. The average response rate for online surveys is about 44 percent (Wu et al. 2022).

internal newsletter and the PQI team. Community partners may receive survey results through DSS annual reports, newsletters, meetings, or board reviews. DSS has begun to hold discussions on community partner survey results with the TFN Equity Coalition and plans to engage community partners in future discussions once they share their equity statement in January 2025.

Implementation facilitators and barriers

Facilitators

DSS identified multiple factors that have helped with the implementation of data practices to promote equity:

Commitment from leaders

Leadership support of the equity mission has allowed DSS staff to incorporate equity throughout their agency. DSS leaders have worked to integrate an equity focus into every level of the agency, engage staff in equity conversations, and continuously revisit their definition of equity to make it more inclusive.

“I think, broadly, [equity] is in all of our decisions that we make now. When you’re making certain decisions, you think about safety, you think about risk, you think about equity.”

—DSS leader

Training and planning

Case study respondents highlighted the planning and prework that helped lay the groundwork to be able to have conversations about equity-focused data collection. This included trainings for the management team and staff as well as monthly facilitated conversations with the racial equity team. One virtual eight-week training course facilitated by Sage Wellness Group was attended by members of the management team (the Director, Assistant Director, and unit supervisors) and racial equity teams (which includes staff from all levels of the agency). Attendees met for a few hours every week, which allowed them to have meaningful conversations about race, privilege, and equity. DSS has also begun providing an introductory training to all new hires on an annual or as-needed basis.

Community engagement

Examining local data has helped DSS engage community partners in equity discussions by highlighting the demographics of the people served through programs in the community. Using the data has also allowed staff to identify patterns across the agency and recognize that the issues are systemic—rather than specific to an individual or a single caseworker. DSS highlighted that this has helped create more staff buy-in for using data to advance racial and ethnic equity.

Documentation of equity-related work

DSS maintains a running list of its racial equity initiatives and is conscious of the historical implications related to equity work. This list is maintained by the agency’s Director and documents DSS’s equity work over the last 6 years. DSS recognizes that an equitable system cannot be constructed overnight and is dedicated to this work for the long term. Thus, DSS reported that having this list easily available to reference for messaging to staff, support grant applications, and guide next steps in their equity journey has kept everyone on the same page, particularly when experiencing staff turnover or changes in leadership.

Barriers

DSS has encountered a few challenges with the implementation of its data practices to promote equity:

Access to adequate data systems and resources

DSS does not yet have a data system in place that (1) provides comprehensive options to accurately reflect all families' self-identified race and ethnicity and (2) allows for DSS to pull or generate reports of the data. Additionally, because the data for the EDI Dashboard are manually gathered from CJAMS, tallied, and entered into the Google spreadsheets by supervisors, DSS staff reported some concerns regarding data quality and potentially missing data. Due to these challenges, DSS has explored developing its own data system, but obtaining meaningful direction on how to do this was difficult. DSS tried to seek preliminary expert advice but was unsuccessful due to the challenges of explaining its nuanced, complex system to outside consultants. Additionally, DSS is a smaller agency with limited resources where staff often assume multiple roles. Prioritizing this work can be challenging without staff members who are dedicated to data management.

Additional training and guidance

Although DSS supervisors are passionate about using data to address and understand equity within their system, they said further guidance and training on best practices and using Google Sheets to analyze data could be especially helpful. DSS staff also noted ongoing, mandatory training could be beneficial because intake workers do not consistently enter data into CJAMS, partly due to large staff turnover in the Intake Department in recent years.

Small samples for conducting analyses

Community partners also noted concern that small sample sizes could limit their ability to conduct analyses. Given the small number of children and families served by the child welfare system in Talbot County, changes in caseloads across the child welfare continuum could have an outsized effect on analysis and require caution in interpretation.

Additional opportunities for furthering data practices that enhance equity

Revise the data elements in the EDI Dashboard

DSS wants to broaden its equity focus beyond race and ethnicity domains, although staff acknowledged that keeping it focused on race and ethnicity at the start of the process has allowed them to see progress and build buy-in for the use of data to advance equity. DSS staff would like to begin collecting additional data, such as (1) data for youth who are no longer in care, to track outcomes for older youth⁷, and (2) race and ethnicity data on the families reported to DSS through hotline calls. They would also like to connect the EDI Dashboard to their community partners to determine barriers to services, such as whether there is a lack of racially and ethnically diverse service providers or whether a relationship exists between loss of housing and children entering the child welfare system. DSS leaders encourage staff to engage in these discussions by reminding them that they can collect additional data points for the spreadsheet at any time. Additionally, DSS is currently working on mining race and ethnicity data from the Child Advocacy

⁷ If pursued, this would be locally collected data in addition to the data collected for the National Youth in Transition Database.

Center⁸ and determining how to integrate those data into future iterations of the EDI Dashboard.

Integrate the EDI Dashboard into Performance Quality Improvement meetings and improve staff comfort with equity-related conversations

DSS leaders believe that data can be a valuable tool to inform decision making and improve practice. They expect to integrate race and ethnicity data collection and the EDI Dashboard into their unit and PQI meetings to promote and normalize agency discussions about equity and think as a team about how to use data to improve practice. Leaders explained that comfort with using data can differ depending on the size of the child welfare agency's jurisdiction. As a smaller agency, the idea of using data to inform decision making and drive practice is new to many staff. Leaders are hopeful that the EDI Dashboard will be a useful tool in helping staff see the value in using data to address equity. DSS also noted that this information can be used to enhance the workforce, such as by examining hiring practices to ensure that staff reflect the races and ethnicities of the families they serve and that they are developing partnerships with culturally responsive service providers.

Revise REI staff survey to evaluate equity work and address additional dimensions of equity

The most recent round of REI survey results showed larger percentages of staff who felt they were adequately prepared to address inequity in their work when compared to previous years. DSS leaders are currently determining how to revise the next round of REI staff surveys to obtain information related to how their work is directly impacting staff practice with families. For example, they are considering asking questions about how staff are taking what they learn about equity and applying it to their practice with families. DSS also indicated that the REI survey will no longer solely focus on racial equity. Future iterations of the survey will be expanded to address a broader lens of equity and include additional marginalized populations, including LGBTQ/gender; ability; neurodivergent; socioeconomic status/class; citizenship; and age.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how one predominantly rural child welfare agency implemented data-driven approaches in an effort to improve its practice with families of color and highlights the importance for jurisdictions of all sizes to engage in equity work. Although still in early stages, these DSS efforts serve as an example of how small agencies with finite resources can begin to meaningfully engage in equity-informed data practices. Because trends and variation over time may be more difficult to assess in smaller systems with limited sample sizes, developing strategies to regularly review data may keep agencies accountable and focused on equity.

DSS leaders understand that equity work is ongoing and iterative. Thus, they continuously evaluate how to refine their data practices to position them to act on the information they collect. For example, DSS is considering how to adjust some of the data elements in the EDI Dashboard to capture more relevant data that may identify potential disparities in care, such as data on youth no longer in care to track outcomes for older youth and race and ethnicity data on the families reported to DSS through hotlines. DSS is also considering how to add questions to the REI staff survey to help leaders understand whether staff are

⁸ The Child Advocacy Center is a satellite DSS agency that coordinates the investigations and multidisciplinary response to incidents of sexual abuse and severe physical abuse and neglect with community partners, law enforcement, and the state's attorney.

integrating equity work into their practice with families. Moving forward, DSS hopes to use the results from these initiatives to improve equity within the system by informing service provision, opportunities for staff education and training, and program and policy changes.

Methodology

Site identification. The CW-SEED project team gathered recommendations for potential case study sites from several sources, including an environmental scan of data practices agencies are using to promote equity, project team members, and Administration for Children and Families' regional program managers. The team sought recommendations for states, counties, or localities that were using innovative data practices to promote equity. The project team also sought input from the CW-SEED expert group and presented a list of the top choices and alternate choices for case study site informational calls to the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE). Choices represented a range of data practices adopted by agencies working across the country with different areas of equity focus, including agencies working to advance equity related to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) or among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. Although the project team had developed an initial understanding of the sites' data practices as a result of our recommendation process, the team pursued more in-depth knowledge of the data practices through preliminary information calls with child welfare agency staff in each site.

Data sources and data collection methods. To prepare for the site visits, the project team requested practice and policy documents and any written reports related to the data practice. The team tailored interview protocols to reflect information gleaned from the document review and used semi-structured interview guides to guide interviews focused on data practices with small groups of leaders, program managers, frontline staff, and community partners. The research protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board. The primary data sources for each case study include (1) information from the jurisdiction selection process, (2) jurisdiction-specific documents and the completed review rubrics for each of the documents, (3) notes from interviews and observations, (4) notes from focus group discussions, and (5) any documents from the environmental scan relevant to the jurisdiction.

Data analysis and case study findings. The project team conducted qualitative analysis by coding the data sources using NVivo software. The team used this to identify themes of key findings, which are presented in the case study summary. The case study summary was shared with the site and with the CW-SEED expert group for review.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Talbot County Department of Social Services

<https://dhs.maryland.gov/local-offices/talbot-county/>

Agency contact:

Linda Webb, linda.webb@maryland.gov. ▲

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Christine Fortunato, Nicole Denmark, and Jenessa Malin
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