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World Changing Ideas

**2021 FINALIST**

“ The companies and organizations we honor with our World Changing Ideas Awards exemplify the human ability to solve problems.

The 34 winners and finalists represent the kind of innovative thinking that will help us channel the optimism and hope of this moment into a better future.

## C!A's Idaho Team Fixes the Child Welfare Capacity Crisis

Netflix's expose "The Trials of Gabriel Fernandez" is just the latest in a twenty-year history of heartbreaking stories of abused children and the revolving door of foster care. With each story like Gabriel's, there is a renewed interest in improving the work of child welfare, but solutions always seem to fall short, never really radically improving the system for children, families, and workers.

In 2020, however, the Change and Innovation Agency (C!A®) teamed with the state of Idaho and implemented their world changing idea to fix the state's child welfare capacity crisis.

Results were astounding.

*Keep reading to learn more.*



Change & Innovation Agency

Across the country, case workers know the pressure of unrealistic demands caused by towering caseloads. The average safety assessment takes 22 hours to complete, each worker is assigned between 3-7 per week. If a child is found unsafe, they require 14 hours of work each week, and caseloads are easily in the twenties. We are giving workers 2-3 times as much work as time available, and the result is a capacity crisis. To survive the crisis, every child welfare leader struggles to manage missed deadlines, oversee massive case backlog, control rising costs of treatment, and cope with an ever-growing number of kids in foster care. While desperately looking for more resources and new technology, they spend their time continually revising their safety practices looking for something to alleviate the pressure, but nothing seems to be working.

Our attempts to “fix” child welfare, have actually made things worse. The “New Technology” is built to manage workload and track tasks. While this level of transparency is needed when work piles up, in order to manage tasks, you must enter task data. So much data is entered today that over a quarter of the assessment time is spent in front of a screen. Advances in mobility and data mining help, but do little to help workers be efficient. Changes to the policy and practice have only resulted in system duplication and practice confusion, neither of which attack the root cause: capacity.

The key to finding the solution that works was to stop concentrating on the symptoms, and instead look at the work through a system’s lens. The Change and Innovation Agency (C!A®) teamed with the state of Idaho to dissect their capacity crisis and redesign how the work is done. Using process improvement methodologies developed for government by C!A and the practice expertise of Idaho practitioners, the team redesigned the work to assure cases were addressed in record time and leaders had new insights into the workflow.

The keys included giving workers instant access to child safety expertise, developing differential documentation paths based on child needs, and reducing the burdens of common system issues including case backlog and batching.

By focusing on the system of child welfare and rethinking how the modern worker is supported, Idaho’s 2020 **results are astounding:**



Average time from allegation to safety decision dropped from over **50 to 15 days**



Caseloads are down **83%**



Backlogged cases plummeted over **90%**



Subsequent substantiations are down by **48%** demonstrating an increase in quality



**20%** less children in foster care

The real result is time. Time for case workers to spend with the vulnerable children that need them most. Capacity to do more good, and help kids like Gabriel.



*As taken from C!A’s World Changing Ideas Awards 2021 Submission*

The most common approaches to fixing child welfare are to increase the number of workers, or trust new technology will help manage workload. Both have been faulty thinking for years.

In order to keep up with workload, you would need double, or triple, the staffing in most offices. Costly and politically improbable, this solution is also impossible. Child welfare is not a career, it is a calling. We are asking people to knock on a stranger's door and determine the safety of a child for less money than they could make managing a fast food joint. It's not just the years of training needed to do this job, it's the right heart. The right combination of skill and heart is a much rarer commodity than their compensation suggests. Most offices have openings they cannot fill today as there just are not enough of these amazing people to fill the gap.

Technology puts all the focus on workload management and practice, and little on efficiency and effectiveness. New systems assure every policy is followed, and every step documented, but rarely help the worker do the work faster. Even the promising hope of artificial intelligence has proven only to add another layer to an already duplicative system.

Why is this new approach worthy of recognition? Two reasons, it's radically different and the solution works.

What makes this solution radically different is that we didn't look at child welfare practice at all. Our

research showed that the vast majority of time, the safety assessments in Idaho were done correctly and current practice and policy worked. What was robbing offices of capacity was the same thing that robs a factory: backlog, bottlenecks, batches, and non-value added work.

It is not easy to get social workers to look at a family like Ford looks at an assembly line, but by making their work visible and introducing systems thinking, we were able to do just that. We looked at the initial allegation like a supply chain and asked, "are we getting supplies the right way in order to begin work timely?"

We saw where work was bottlenecking at the supervisor level, and broke the long held belief that only your supervisor could help close cases. We attacked the backlog like a pile of orders needing fulfilled until we had an answer, or direction, for every child. Then we built a system where the work never sits. From the time a call comes in until the child is safe, work is always flowing. If the child is clearly safe, there is a path to close the case quickly and move to the next child. If the child is unsafe, the new case management path works with family courts to assure we move at the pace the family can support. If we need more time to assess, we finally have it.

No state has ever seen results like those accomplished in Idaho, and 2020 will be known as the year we fixed the child welfare capacity crisis.





# Increase your capacity to do more good

Public servants by experience and heart, Change & Innovation Agency (CIA®) works with government agencies to increase their capacity to do more good. Although our work spans all areas of government, our passion is helping government agencies improve delivery of vital safety net and child welfare programs that children and families so desperately need. Having worked with human services programs in over 45% of the states in the nation and many counties, CIA has become an industry leader in business process redesign.

To transform systems and regain the capacity that human services need to deliver services, it is critical to think differently about the systems of government. And this is what our team of award-winning consultants and change agents brings to the table: a new way of thinking that challenges the status quo and offers proven, innovative approaches that work for child welfare.

In recent years, CIA's work has helped child welfare agencies achieve some amazing results, including an 80% increase in capacity, 85% reduction in the number of open safety assessments, and a 75% reduction in the time it takes for safety assessments to be completed.

Interested in learning more? Contact us today to explore how we can help you and your team increase capacity to do more good.

**C!A**<sup>®</sup>

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