



The Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability
**STRENGTHENING AGENCYWIDE QUALITY ASSURANCE AND
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**



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Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

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Executive Summary

Quality Assurance (QA) and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) are important components of the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families' (DCYF) **performance improvement continuum**. QA and CQI involve a cyclical, systematic approach to monitoring and strengthening program implementation using data-informed decision making and a focus on program accountability and problem-solving.¹



The agency's founding [legislation](#) establishes a clear intent for DCYF to identify and address systemic issues and substantially improve outcomes at scale. In Spring 2021, DCYF's Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability (OIAA) completed an assessment and made recommendations on the agencywide coordination, capacity, and oversight of QA/CQI activities, building on Chapin Hall's 2019 baseline [report](#). The assessment determined **the agency currently lacks the structure and centralized supports necessary to achieve its strategic priorities and outcome goals for children, youth, and families.**

The assessment found that substantial QA/CQI resources² exist across DCYF; however, the level, organization, and intent vary greatly across the agency and are concentrated in some individual service lines.³ Resources are particularly low for Child Welfare contracted services. There is no consistent expectation or agency guidance regarding the structure of QA/CQI resources, standards, and practices or alignment with the agency's strategic priorities and outcome goals. Additionally, no formal or informal oversight, monitoring, or information sharing mechanisms exist across the agency. Centralized support is currently limited to partial data support from OIAA.

Based on the findings, **DCYF executive leadership approved the following recommendations on June 1, 2021:**

1. Establish a small centralized QA/CQI support team within OIAA.
2. Develop and implement an agency QA/CQI framework, standards, and Community of Practice (CoP).
3. Institute structural guardrails for programmatically embedded QA/CQI functions.
4. Expand QA/CQI resources for Child Welfare contracted services.
5. Establish a minimum threshold of QA/CQI resources for service delivery programs.
6. Fully integrate QA/CQI data management and reporting functions.

Implementing these recommendations will ensure:

- QA/CQI resources are more equitable
- QA/CQI functions simultaneously meet the needs of the individual service lines and the agency as a whole
- QA/CQI practitioners have access to the centralized supports and resources they need to strengthen their practice
- DCYF staff and leadership have access to high-quality, timely data needed to make evidence-informed decisions, continuously learn and improve, and engage in strategic policy and practice reform

¹ 2019 Chapin Hall Baseline Agency Performance Report, p. 3

² Approximately 122 FTEs for QA/CQI and Data Management; Home Visiting and Early Achievers have substantial contracts with external partners (approx. \$30.8m total)

³ Adolescent Services, Child Welfare Field, Early Learning, Eligibility & Provider Supports, Family Support, Juvenile Justice, and Licensing

Assessment Process and Findings

Project Overview

OIAA assessed the agency’s coordination, capacity, and oversight of QA/CQI activities, including:

- **QA Functions:** activities to ensure quality requirements are fulfilled (compliance/accountability-focused)
- **CQI Functions:** activities to improve practice and performance (learning/improvement-focused)
- **Data Management Functions:** activities related to data management, including data quality assurance, for the purposes of QA/CQI reporting

In October 2020, a cross-functional advisory committee of DCYF staff was formed to guide the assessment and development of recommendations to strengthen the agency’s QA and CQI. The group identified four assessment categories: Assets and Structure, Standards & Requirements, Statewide Coordination & Feedback Loops, and Data Products & Supports. Additional stakeholder engagement included a staff survey, interviews with the director/senior leadership of each primary service line, and discussions with QA/CQI practitioners in Child Welfare Field Operations. OIAA relied on the 2019 Chapin Hall [report](#), advisory committee expertise, and survey and interview results throughout the process.

Survey and Interview Results

A critical step in the assessment process was to survey DCYF staff with primary responsibility for QA, CQI, and/or data management functions. An anonymous survey was sent to 103 DCYF staff in December 2020. There was a 54% response rate (56 of 103) with representation from all functional areas and service lines.

QA/CQI Staff Survey Results

| Existing QA/CQI Structure and System | |
|--|--|
| Identified as Areas of Strength* | Identified as Needs Improvement |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making evidence-informed decisions - Following a set of QA/CQI standards - Using QA/CQI to evaluate the effectiveness of our services/programs - Culture of performance improvement - QA/CQI work leads to practice change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cohesive approach to QA/CQI across DCYF - Connecting QA/CQI practitioners across DCYF - Tools and support to improve services/practices - Engaging external partners - Practices reflect a commitment to racial equity |

**Note: Most respondents were referring to their individual service-line QA/CQI systems when assessing strengths.*

Additionally, a high-level thematic analysis of the survey comments identified the following:

- Some coordination happens within service lines, but coordination across the agency isn’t happening
- Racial equity should be at the center of the work
- There is a desire to improve performance, but the work is under-resourced and lacks a clear focus
- More reactive than proactive with a greater focus on compliance versus improvement
- Stronger leadership and accountability

Another important step in the assessment process was to interview the director/senior leadership of each service line. A total of seven interviews were held with 10 DCYF leaders in December 2020.

Leadership Interview Results: High-Level Themes

1. Leaders are focused on improving the performance of their own service line.
2. Each service line has independently developed its own QA, CQI, and data management structures, requirements, and resources with minimal guidance from DCYF.
3. Some service lines have almost no QA/CQI resources, but there is a desire to expand those efforts.
4. Interest in receiving centralized QA/CQI and related data management supports.

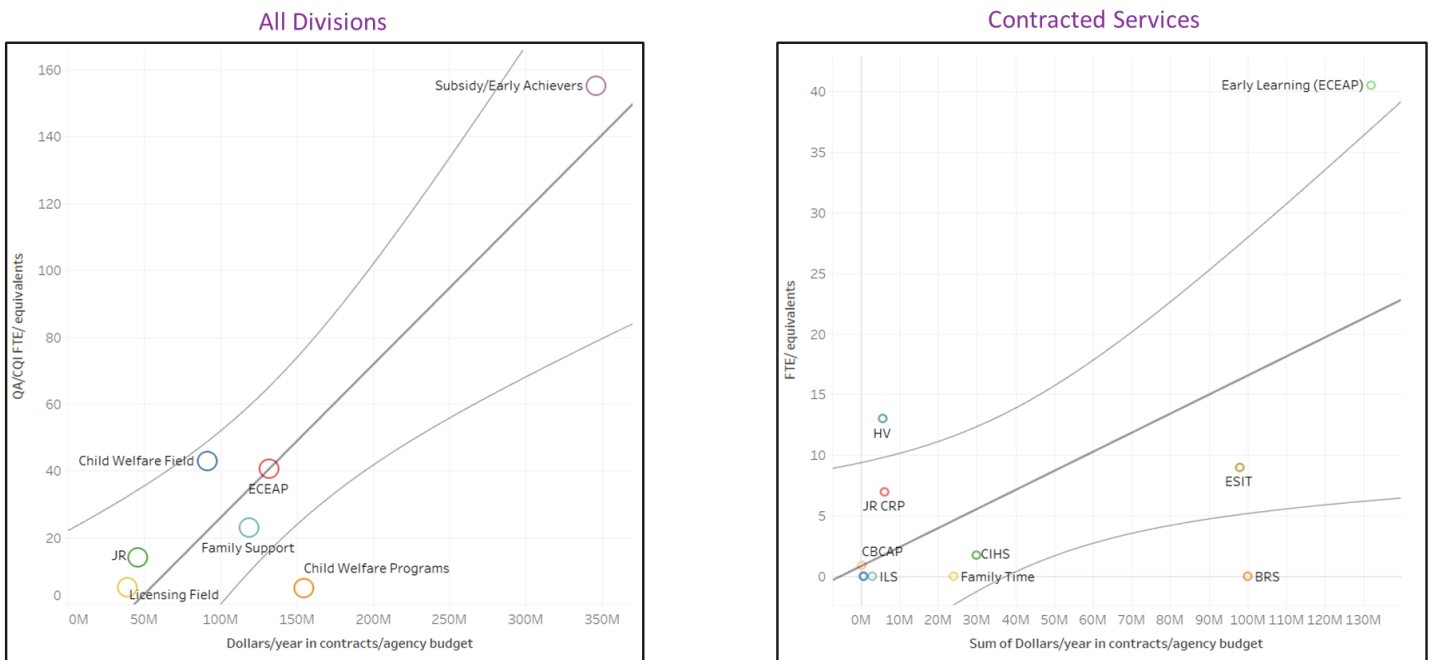
Key Findings

OIAA presented the following key findings to the DCYF Executive Leadership Team (ELT) in January 2021.

Culture: The assessment found evidence of a strong performance improvement culture throughout DCYF, with 84% of survey respondents (47 of 56) agreeing that their team had a strong culture and 77% of survey respondents (43 of 56) agreeing that the agency as a whole had a strong culture.

Assets and Structures: DCYF has approximately 122 FTEs dedicated to QA/CQI functions and a number of large contracts with external partners to support CQI functions. Additional staff support these functions throughout the agency, but are not considered QA/CQI practitioners or data management staff, which was the scope of the assessment. Resources are concentrated in individual service lines, and there is no agencywide guidance on how service lines should structure their resources. As a result, the level, organization, and intent of those resources vary substantially across service lines and are mostly inherited from the agencies of origin.

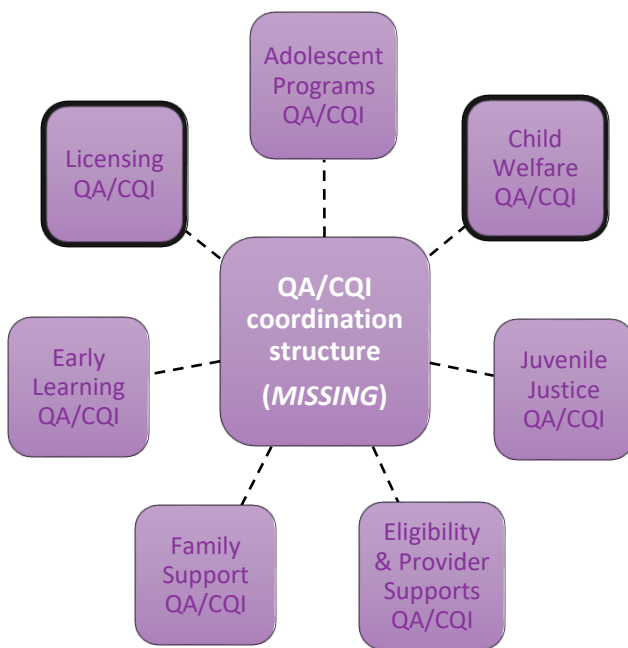
Variation in QA/CQI Resource Allocation



Additionally, there is no agencywide QA/CQI structure in place or formal linkage between service line structures. OIAA serves as the sole agencywide resource, but support is limited to data management support for some service lines.

Standards and Requirements: Since substantial variation exists across service lines and DCYF does not have shared QA/CQI standards across service lines, the assessment attempted to identify national QA/CQI standards and best practices related to the level and organization of resources. No best practices related to resource allocation and organization were identified; however, the best practices that were identified during the assessment could inform future development of shared agency QA/CQI standards.

Statewide Coordination and Feedback Loops: Three types of statewide coordination were observed: 1) coordination that occurs within centralized units such as Finance and Contracts, 2) coordination of initiatives/special projects across multiple service lines, and 3) coordination within a service line. All three have intentional structures in place supporting the coordination of efforts; however, there is no agencywide coordinating structure in place for the agency’s overall QA/CQI efforts, which prevents feedback loops from being established and subsequently performance improvement from occurring at scale.



Robust statewide coordination and feedback loops exist

Note: There are opportunities to support alignment of QA/CQI activities between service lines, such as developing a QA model for the use and oversight of the GAIN-SS assessment tool used in both Child Welfare and Juvenile Rehabilitation to identify behavioral health disorders. This would enable the agency to ensure quality administration of assessment tools throughout DCYF, regardless of program area.

Data Products and Supports: The effective use of data to drive QA/CQI varies greatly across DCYF. While more common in large organizations, the variation across DCYF is stark and problematic. Some service lines within Early Learning, for example, have a rich array of data systems, useful historical data, and staff capable of using data to make decisions. Other service lines lack the data systems and training to adequately collect, access, and utilize data to make decisions, largely relying on centralized resources or inadequate data systems.

The lack of an integrated administrative data system and standardized training around data practice and usage⁴ remains a resonant need and significant gap, limiting the agency’s ability to track progress on its strategic and racial equity priorities. Inconsistent definitions of data management tools and products make it difficult to identify the shared needs of QA/CQI staff, which varied in the staff survey. Staff are ready to adopt more modern data practices and collaborate when centralized support is available, despite barriers to data access.

This indicates a growing interest in and willingness to participate in building centralized data products.

⁴ Needs originally identified in the 2019 Chapin Hall report (see Appendix B).

Recommendations

From February to May 2021, OIAA worked with the advisory committee to identify a set of recommendations based on the assessment findings. Recommendations were informed by another round of division leadership interviews and input from a 15-member cross-service line QA/CQI User Experience Group to ensure their needs were addressed.

The advisory committee established goals and criteria to ensure the recommendations were impactful.

DCYF QA/CQI System Goals

1. Unified vision of QA/CQI as a core business process to improve outcomes and eliminate disparities.
2. Strong culture and capacity to continuously learn, improve, and build on success.
3. Intentional alignment across the agency to cultivate innovation and promote diversity of perspective.

Recommendations had to meet the following *criteria* to be considered:

- ✓ *Meaningful* – meets one or more of the three identified goal(s) for a DCYF QA/CQI system
- ✓ *Responsive* – addresses the assessment findings or stakeholder feedback
- ✓ *Simple & Straightforward* – transparent and easy to understand by all audiences
- ✓ *Actionable* – offers sufficient detail to get started and work toward next steps
- ✓ *Balanced* – recommendations should benefit the agency, but not at the cost of significantly impacting the individual services lines
- ✓ *Thoughtful* – positions the agency to achieve its future strategic and equity priorities

The recommendations are presented individually in this report; however, they are intended to work in tandem to produce the needed QA/CQI and related data management infrastructure.

Recommendation 1: Establish a Small Centralized QA/CQI Support Team in OIAA

Two full-time permanent positions with QA/CQI expertise will provide support to the agency's service lines to further strengthen QA/CQI practices across the agency as an enterprise resource, with an initial focus on:

- Implement Recommendations 2 and 3.
- Provide training, technical assistance, and "expert" consultation/mentoring/coaching services to support the development of knowledge and skills of QA/CQI practitioners, including applying an equity lens to QA/CQI practices; support new staff orientation – see *Recommendation 2*.

The new team will not have supervisory oversight over existing service line QA/CQI teams and staff.

Rationale: No team in the agency is currently responsible for the proposed scope of work, and the assessment did not identify additional capacity within service lines to perform this work in addition to their regular job duties; therefore, a new team must be formed. OIAA was specifically created in HB1661. The bill states that "the primary duties and focus of the office are on continuous improvement...", which includes "conduct[ing] quality assurance and evaluation of programs and services within the department." Access to centralized support and resources from staff with QA/CQI expertise was prioritized by the QA/CQI User Experience Group, which is comprised of QA/CQI practitioners and related data management staff from among the agency's service lines.

End State: QA/CQI practitioners have access to the centralized supports and resources they need to strengthen their practice.

Recommendation 2: Develop and Implement an Agency QA/CQI Framework, Standards, and Community of Practice

The framework will unite the agency in a shared approach to QA/CQI. The Community of Practice (CoP) will build a network of QA/CQI practitioners to identify and elevate effective practices. Equity practices will be included in the framework and highlighted in the CoP to reinforce the importance of these practices.

Rationale: The assessment identified the need to align service-line QA/CQI activities and reinforce a shared culture of performance improvement. There is currently no mechanism to bring QA/CQI practitioners across the agency together to support peer learning and cross-pollinate best practices, a priority identified by QA/CQI practitioners. In addition, there are no agreed-upon cross-agency standards for QA/CQI practices.

End State: The agency possesses the QA/CQI structure and support systems necessary to achieve its strategic priorities and outcome goals for children, youth, and families.

Recommendation 3: Institute Structural Guardrails for Programmatically Embedded QA/CQI Practitioner Functions

The majority of QA/CQI functions are performed by practitioners embedded within the programs they support. These staff are responsible for discovering problems and facilitating improvements, which requires a degree of objectivity and autonomy to function effectively. Implementing agency-level checks and balances is prudent to avoid a “chilling effect”, where problems are minimized or even suppressed, which is possible given most QA/CQI practitioners report through the same line of authority as the program(s) they support.

To avoid unintended consequences and promote a balanced resource management approach, the following initial structural guardrails⁵ are recommended:

- Fully integrate QA/CQI data management and reporting – *see Recommendation 6.*
- Develop and implement an agency QA/CQI framework to establish enterprise-wide expectations and guide service line practices – *see Recommendation 2.*
- Create avenues for professional development supports from outside the programmatic lines of authority – *see Recommendations 1 and 2.*

Rationale: No evidence was uncovered during the assessment to justify separating QA/CQI functions from the programmatic lines of authority; however, the risk of unintended consequences occurring without adequate counterbalancing measures was noted, especially related to QA functions. DCYF does not currently have a mechanism to provide centralized oversight of QA/CQI practitioner functions embedded in the programmatic lines of authority. Integrating data management and reporting functions ensures problems can be independently identified and shared with embedded QA/CQI practitioners to support their work. It also ensures there are standard data management and reporting methodology, a process to regularly update the methods, and opportunity to leverage learning and resources for data management and reporting across the agency – *see Recommendation 6.*

End State: Programmatically embedded QA/CQI practitioner functions simultaneously meet the needs of the individual service lines and the agency as a whole.

⁵ Internal controls established by DCYF to provide adequate oversight and management of decentralized QA/CQI resources.

Recommendation 4: Expand QA/CQI Resources for Child Welfare Contracted Services

In order to achieve more equitable resource allocation across the agency, expand QA/CQI resources to the Child Welfare contracted service lines as they become available.

Rationale: The assessment demonstrated clear disparities in the level of QA/CQI resources available across the agency, with the largest gap evident in contracted Child Welfare services. In order to be even with the range of average with other DCYF programs, these lines would collectively require 30+ additional FTE/equivalent.

End State: Child Welfare contracted service lines increase capacity to conduct quality assurance and continuous improvement for its contracted services portfolio. QA/CQI resource allocation is more equitable.

Recommendation 5: Establish a Minimum Threshold of QA/CQI Resources for Service Delivery Programs

As DCYF establishes new service delivery divisions, both direct and contracted services, it should establish a minimum threshold for QA/CQI capacity of at least 1.0 FTE. The assessment found at least one unit without any QA/CQI resources.

Rationale: While the QA/CQI assessment did not identify a best practice related to minimum QA/CQI resource levels, there is a clear need to provide some level of QA/CQI resources to newly formed programs with service delivery responsibilities, and one FTE is the lowest threshold that can be established. The level of resources dedicated to each service delivery program (direct and/or contracted) should be based on the size and complexity of the service delivery portfolio and desire to create more equitable QA/CQI resource allocation across the agency.

End State: All DCYF programs with direct or contracted service delivery responsibilities have a minimum level of QA/CQI resources available (centralized or embedded) to support those functions.

Recommendation 6: Fully Integrate QA/CQI Data Management and Reporting Functions

In order to strengthen DCYF's QA/CQI data practices and complete the integration process started with the initial merger, OIAA will work with IT and the various service lines to fully integrate QA/CQI data management functions across the agency. These functions include collection, reporting, and analysis of data used to support QA/CQI, and includes development of data products that span multiple teams and data systems.

Rationale: QA/CQI practitioners and program staff rely on high-quality, timely data to perform their work. Systematized data management improves the overall quality and efficiency of these resources, ensuring standard and modern data management and reporting methods, leveraging learning, and maximizing the full array of data resources across the agency, as well as enabling DCYF to monitor and improve outcomes for children, youth, and families who receive multiple services. Feedback gathered from the QA/CQI User Experience Group indicates that data staff are struggling to understand how their work compliments and informs agencywide initiatives. DCYF inherited inconsistent data management structures from the agencies of origin (Child Welfare, Early Learning, and Juvenile Rehabilitation), which were unresolved at the time of the merger. Some service lines rely on centralized data management support from OIAA, and others have fully embedded data units. IT already utilizes an enterprise-wide approach. OIAA and IT successfully provide centralized data management support for Child Welfare, the service line with the greatest number of QA/CQI practitioners (approximately 47%). OIAA and IT currently receive multiple requests for support from data staff that are challenging to address in a decentralized environment. The recommendation is an opportunity to shift to a more proactive, data product mindset to address deeper data management needs versus using limited resources to fulfill ad-hoc data requests. This recommendation is also an identified structural guardrail to help counter-balance QA/CQI practitioner functions embedded in the program lines of authority – see *Recommendation 3*.

Specific recommended activities include:

- Proactively engage QA/CQI practitioners and division leadership in the design of a fully integrated model that meets their needs and ensures a smooth and successful transition, building on initial feedback collected during the March 2021 User Experience Group sessions.
- Based on service lines needs and specific job functions performed by data unit staff,⁶ identify which staff to transfer to OIAA or IT and which staff should remain embedded. Work with Human Resources to transfer staff to their new team and provide professional development supports.
- Restructure OIAA to best utilize a fully integrated model and institutionalize connections to QA/CQI practitioners and program leadership as the primary customers.
- Mitigate any identified risks of implementing a fully integrated approach, including relationship erosion between program staff and data staff in previously embedded units.
- Request change management support from the DCYF Organization Development Office.
- Use demonstration projects with short-cycle testing and refinement as a mechanism to build connections across data units. Work with data staff to identify mutually beneficial projects that advance integration and meet the immediate needs of QA/CQI practitioners and division leadership.

End State: DCYF staff and leadership across the agency who support performance improvement have access to high quality, timely data needed to make evidence-informed decisions, continuously learn and improve, and engage in strategic policy and practice reform.

Conclusion

The DCYF Executive Leadership Team approved the recommendations on June 1, 2021.

OIAA started implementation on July 1, 2021, starting with Recommendation 1 and Recommendation 6, and is working with Child Welfare programs to identify opportunities to implement Recommendation 4.

Acknowledgments

OIAA would like to thank the Advisory Committee, Division Leadership, and User Experience Group who helped inform this assessment, as well as more than 50 DCYF staff who took time to complete the anonymous staff survey.

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| | Harvey Perez | Rachael Lawson | |
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⁶ At the time of the assessment this included 29 FTEs in Early Learning, Eligibility & Provider Supports, Family Support, and Licensing.