Closing Remarks by Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO,
The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Symposium on the Future of Child Welfare: Game-Changing Innovations for State
Administrators
"Inaugurating an Innovation Agenda in Child Welfare"
Baltimore, MD
April 8, 2011

I want to thank the organizers of the conference, starting with [Case Commons CEO] Kathleen Feely and the entire Case Commons staff. They did a terrific job organizing and executing this event. I also want to thank all of the presenters and panelists involved. This has been a remarkable opportunity for everyone involved.

I wanted to close the conference with a few themes that I picked up on throughout the day. I heard people asking, "How can technology help with the most important problems that human service systems are facing today?"

There are four areas that I would like to bring up: improving our decision-making process, improving frontline practice and supervision, managing the workload and designing better policy solutions. Technology can help in all four of these areas.

Let me start by talking about decision-making. Humans are quite remarkable decision-making machines, and we are also quite imperfect. We are remarkable because of the immense volume of data, information and perceptions that we can absorb. With that information, we create a narrative. And with that narrative, we negotiate the world.

 We are imperfect because we start to block out things that do not fit our narrative. We do this since the world is so complex and since we are only human. In the work of human services, this is a huge risk. When we construct a narrative, we not only begin to edit out information, we actually change things that do not fit into our version of the story. It is a huge problem when you are talking about whether a child should be in a group home or returned from a foster home.

When the media looks back at a terrible tragedy, the most common thing that people say is, "How could they have possibly left that child in that awful home or in that foster home? How could they have not seen the red flags?" Well, here's exactly why: We are human. It is not about being stupid or careless; it is about being human and how we make decisions. If those red flags do not fit our narrative — and we are the only ones making those decisions — we are going to make mistakes, sometimes with terrible consequences.

Although we are very good at constructing narratives, we are not good at recognizing patterns in data and trends. So, as a result, we rely on anecdote and intuition from the past. We think, "Oh, I recognize this; this is just like what happened to me before." That is pretty sophisticated decision-making, pretty sophisticated analysis. But, if the world has changed, then it is not as good.

So how can technology help? Technology can help by supporting team decision-making. That way, there's not just one person with one narrative; rather, everyone in the room can challenge that narrative. Technology can help by providing both knowledge and trend data in a form that can break through our own narratives. It can help us understand the consequences of our decisions, while giving us feedback in real time. It can help set realistic performance improvement targets, so that the decision-making that we do is constantly reviewed. We can constantly reassess how to make better decisions.

A related area is practice and supervision. As has already been said today, the most important target of change in the child welfare system — and in many of our human services systems — is frontline practice. I would also include supervision. We sometimes forget that supervision is such an important part of improving practice. Technology can help address the challenge of making our practice stronger.

Research has shown that there are some good evidence-based practices. However, even when workers are engaged in evidence-based practice, there are bad outcomes. And here's the remarkable thing: A very small percentage of the workers account for a very large percentage of the bad outcomes. So it's not just about evidence-based practices; it is also about getting feedback.

How can technology help produce feedback? It can help both new and experienced workers by giving them information, tools, policy and guidance on best practices. It can give to the worker family-specific guidance at the click of a mouse, locating problems identified in a case file. A worker might be seeing her first chronically neglectful family, but — as a system — we have seen thousands of cases. So each worker should be armed with the five most significant pieces of information, as well as the 10 questions they should be asking. They should know what to look for and in what circumstances they need to get a hold of their supervisor.

Technology can also support a stronger referral and follow-up network for child welfare to connect to providers. If a caseworker had the ability to fill out an online form quickly, it is much more likely that the resulting referral would stick than if the worker gave the family a card and left the family on its own to call the TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) agency or call the substance abuse agency.

The third way in which technology can help us is by changing how workers spend their time. We hear again and again that workers are well-equipped to do good practice; however, they are spending 30 to 50 percent of their time doing paperwork. Or, they are spending a lot of time trying to click through their antiquated systems to input data. These workers do not have the time to implement best practices in the field because they are spending all of their time documenting their work.

How can technology help reduce the burden of paperwork and data collection? We have new ways to collect data that make it easier to identify data that might have been missed. After all, workers are almost always going to be strapped for time, and it is only human for people to forget things — which can be hugely problematic. But technology can track our work and remind us to fill out specific forms. Technology also makes it possible for workers and other

vital stakeholders to communicate virtually and in real time, instead of playing phone tag and missing out on crucial events. And technology can reduce the time and cost of referring folks to other agencies by providing the kind of planning tools that help structure a worker's time. In all these ways, technology allows workers to spend their time on the highest-payoff activities.

The final way technology can help us is by influencing policy. Very few system leaders in the country have actionable information at their fingertips. In fact, only a few system leaders have an accurate diagnosis of their most crucial problems. That is not a criticism of system leaders; rather, this is the reality and the complexity of the work that we do.

Casey's consulting teams have gone out to many states with very good leaders, some of whom have been in place for a long time. When we sit down and ask, "What do you think your biggest problems are?," they tell us, but it's rare that any agency can produce even the most basic data to support what it believes — even about different age groups in care and the types of problems they face(?). Some of the most important data — on topics like recurrence of abuse and neglect rates; or the different trajectories of kids and families; or the rates of aging out without a permanent family; or the use of residential care and hospital care — is, all too often, simply not available to system leaders.

Unsurprisingly, then, we often find that the problems system leaders think they have are not the problems they actually have. But how can we expect them to accurately diagnose their problems if they don't have the data?

As a result of all of these bad systems and bad data, we get knee-jerk legislation or regulation, based on anecdote rather than comprehensive information. A compelling story runs in the newspaper, and — before you know it — the system actually becomes more cumbersome, more difficult to navigate and tougher for workers to survive. Most importantly, it often becomes tougher, not easier, for families and children to get the help that they need.

The biggest danger and the biggest risk that we have in dealing with policy is "common knowledge" because common knowledge is so often wrong. So how can technology help? Technology allows us to embed the capacity for real-time analysis and trend identification. It allows us to build relationships between data points to identify new and important trends. Many of us don't process numbers in isolation very well. Instead of presenting data numerically, technology allows us to present analyses in visual and much more engaging ways, helping us to see and understand meanings and patterns that will improve the lives of the families and children we serve. Finally, technology can alert us when our performance measures go off target. Technology can automate the process so that, if a worker gets into trouble, we can automatically help him or her improve.

What are the next steps? We are not ready yet to accomplish all of these goals. For instance, we are very far from a single, universal technology solution. But we can advocate for many things together, such as common data definitions and core processes, like intake and eligibility. We should be building modular elements to be interchangeable with different kinds of systems.

I should note that privacy is absolutely critical. I do not want my family's information bandied about, and I am sure you don't either. We must take privacy seriously. At the same time, there are ways to protect privacy — make informed decisions, get informed consent — instead of throwing up our hands in resignation and saying "Sorry, can't do that — confidentiality."

All of these things depend on a shift in mindset that Kathleen Feely began talking about a long, long time ago. Let's stop thinking about cases as cases. Instead, let's start thinking about them as families. When you think about families, you think about multiple relationships, you think about households, you think about change over time. In short, everything that we are all trying to do revolves around families, not cases.

There's a long and exciting list of things that we should do next. But if there is any group of folks that can do it, that can come together to make it happen, I think this is it.

Thanks so much for all of your attention and your hard work.