ROM EQUIPS CHILD WELFARE GROUPS WITH DATA TO BETTER SERVE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The average person's eyes would probably glaze over when asked to sift through stacks of government reports. But for Jared Barton, this is exciting stuff. That's because Barton knows that each data point is powerful: It represents a real child. When examined closely, these data reveal where children are thriving, or barely surviving, in the child welfare system.

As the director of the Results Oriented Management (ROM) project, Barton's passion is to translate these data in a way that improve the child welfare system, where more children have the support they need to thrive and more families are healthy and happy.

ROM, which is part of the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, is a web-based reporting tool designed to transform raw data collected by child welfare agencies – often for federal reports – and put it into an easy-to-understand format the child welfare agencies can review to get a snapshot of how children and families are faring.
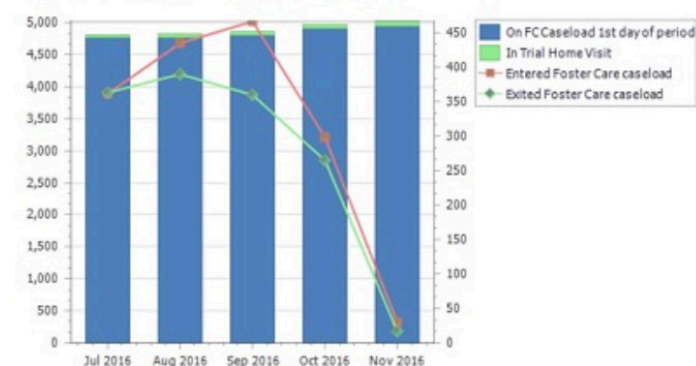
"Our vision is to equip social service organizations that support child welfare initiatives with the best possible data that helps them inform their decision making and improve their service delivery," Barton explains. *He and his team of IT professionals are working to provide ROM's clients with the data they need to improve policies that result in the betterment of children and families that are experiencing vulnerabilities.*

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Foster Care Counts

Count of all children on the caseload (bars on graph) and those children exiting or entering (lines on graph)

Report Time Period: July 1, 2016 - November 5, 2016

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Report Period	Jul 2016		Aug 2016		Sep 2016		Oct 2016		Nov 2016		Total: Jul - Nov 2016	
− On FC Caseload 1st day of period	4770	93.0%	4768	91.6%	4813	91.2%	4920	94.3%	4954	99.4%	4770	75.0%
In placement	4726	92.1%	4719	90.7%	4758	90.1%	4865	93.2%	4886	98.0%	4726	74.3%
In Trial Home Visit	44	0.9%	49	0.9%	55	1.0%	55	1.1%	68	1.4%	44	0.7%
− Entered Foster Care caseload	361	7.0%	435	8.4%	466	8.8%	298	5.7%	30	0.6%	1590	25.0%
Entered from In-Home	250	4.9%	288	5.5%	309	5.9%	204	3.9%	21	0.4%	1072	16.9%
Direct Foster Care entry	111	2.2%	147	2.8%	157	3.0%	94	1.8%	9	0.2%	518	8.1%

"ROM started with the idea that child welfare agencies and child welfare organizations are collecting lots and lots of data to use for various compliance reasons, but at the end of day, not a lot of that data is returned to them to support their decision making, or to inform the policies or programs they will be implementing," explains Barton, Ph.D., assistant research professor with the School of Social Welfare. "Right now, ROM is working to make that happen for children all across the country."

While it might seem strange to have an IT initiative housed within a school of social welfare, Barton says it makes total sense when you consider that ROM lives out the school's values of advancing multi-system competency and empirically-informed social work. Ultimately, ROM reports helps translate critical data and contribute to research endeavors that may improve systems for diverse populations and people experiencing vulnerabilities.

ROM'S REACH IS EXPANDING

ROM launched in 2004 with only a handful of clients. In the ensuing years, it has grown to include contracts with 12 states, which are now using ROM as their primary tool for understanding their child welfare data. ROM generates hundreds of thousands of records per state, making it among the largest collections of longitudinal administrative data in child welfare in the country.

The ROM project has not only grown in the number of sites it serves; it has also widened the scope of data analysis it can provide to clients. Initially, ROM reports primarily focused on measuring outcomes like the incidents of child abuse and neglect in a state. Now ROM can provide reports that shed light on many complex factors that child welfare organizations look at when considering how best to care for children.

As examples, ROM reports can drill down to details like the number of children placed in foster care with their siblings or the number placed in a home near their home school. These reports can help organizations spot trends over time, measure the impact of program changes or adjustments, and even help them predict future trends based on their history. Each of these reports is another tool in a child welfare organization's toolbox, giving them the ability to better understand the stories hidden in the data they collect and chart the best path forward.

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LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Now the ROM team is imagining new ways they can best steward data for the social good. "We have started implementing reports that help us understand about racial disparities and disproportionality in the child welfare system," Barton shares.

"We are looking at things like if there are racial disparities with decision points in the child welfare system. We are hoping to contribute to and support a more inclusive, equitable look at child welfare data, and subsequently, inform and improve systems and how they can work."

For example, removing children from their home and placing them into state custody is very traumatic for them and their families. So, the ROM group hopes to create computer models that can help child welfare professionals identify which cases are good candidates for prevention services, designed to keep the child in the home, instead of removing the child from the home and placing them in foster care.

There are a lot of ideas like this percolating in Barton's head, and he grows animated as he describes new ways ROM could use data to improve individual children's lives and help transform the child welfare system, making it more compassionate, more just, and more equitable for all.

As the father of two little girls, this mission feels intensely personal for him. "If I can look at my family and say I believe in my children and that they can grow up and make a difference it the world, if I feel like my family is deserving of that, then I have to believe all families are deserving of that."

QUESTIONS?
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