

When Social Services Undermine Well-being

The intertwined challenges that many people face might be addressed more effectively together than separately.

By David Bornstein

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In the opening paragraph of “The Wealth of Nations,” Adam Smith observed, “The greatest improvement in the productive powers” of mankind come from the “division of labor.” Smith’s idea and his famous illustration — a pin factory that could increase its production hundreds- or thousands-fold via specialization — helped inspire the Industrial Revolution, informed the automobile assembly line, and remains in play around the world, from factories that print semiconductors by the billions to surgeons who repair cataracts in minutes.

But the division of labor has fallen short when it comes to social problems. Over the past two generations, pin-factory-style specialization in social services has sought to help people facing an array of social challenges, including poverty, mental illness, homelessness, addiction, violence and trauma. All too often, these efforts meet with disappointing results.

Helping people flourish in the 21st century may require a reintegration of labor. Indeed, one of the most promising frameworks emerging is the concept of “well-being.” Around the globe, from [Bhutan](#) to [Britain](#) to [New Zealand](#), a holistic well-being framework is beginning to taking root. Well-being addresses a complex set of needs and experiences. So one big question is: What does it mean to translate this framework into practice, especially within the constraints of public systems? Next week, a second article will look at that question.

The focus of this essay is on the problems created when we try to meet human needs with isolated services. One group that has explored this question extensively is the [Full Frame Initiative](#), based in western Massachusetts. It is advancing a well-being approach with major partners that include five state agencies in Massachusetts that are integrating anti-violence and housing services, as well as Missouri’s juvenile justice and child welfare systems and St. Louis’s family courts.

The Full Frame Initiative was founded in 2009 by Katya Fels Smyth after she spent over a decade running [On the Rise](#), an organization that she had founded in Cambridge, Mass., to assist women facing homelessness, trauma and crisis.

“My ‘aha,’” Ms. Smyth recalled, “was that I saw that what is driving cycles of poverty, violence and trauma is, in part, that we focus on short-term fixes that undermine people’s long-term well-being. And what I mean by well-being is the set of needs and experiences everybody shares for health and hope. In order to get short-term forward movement on a problem, we ask the people who have the fewest well-being assets to give up some of them.”

Consider the case of Lola, who became a member of On the Rise’s community after having lived on the streets for years. She had fallen out with her family and had stopped taking her anti-psychotic medication — in large part because she felt the side effects compromised her ability to stay safe on the streets.

Ms. Smyth’s team helped Lola move into transitional housing at a local Y.W.C.A. She lived there for nearly two years. During that time, Lola reconnected with her family, became active in the Y community and resumed taking her medication. “She became kind of the queen bee,” Ms. Smyth said. “She was taking newcomers under her wing. People counted on her.”

Then Lola got lucky. Her number on a waiting list for government-subsidized housing came up, and she moved into her own apartment.

Within months, she was back living on the street.

What happened?

“At the Y, Lola had a purpose,” Ms. Smyth said. “The staff counted on her to show new people around. It was close to the things that she needed. She could get to her medical appointments pretty easily. She felt safe there because not only was she known, but there were people around.”

“We didn’t pay attention to that,” Ms. Smyth said. “She didn’t pay attention to that. We were so busy celebrating her housing.”

From her experiences running On the Rise, examining effective programs around the country and [collaborating with Dr. Lisa Goodman](#), a professor at Boston College who focuses on the intersection of poverty, mental health and intimate partner violence, Ms. Smyth began to see a pattern. When social services helped people achieve positive, sustained changes, it was because they attended to an array of core needs together, not separately.

Conversely, when services failed, it was because they forced people to make trade-offs: to give up something of vital importance.

Over time, Ms. Smyth refined her analysis to delineate [five domains of well-being](#). She summarized them: “Social connectedness — who you depend on and who depends on you, and having a feeling of belonging; safety — when we can express core parts of our identity without harm or shame; mastery — the sense that we have influence over our future and have the skills to navigate life; meaningful access to relevant resources — the ability to meet our core needs in ways that aren’t dangerous or shaming; and stability — having things we can count on to be the same day to day, and knowing that a small bump won’t set off a crisis.”

“These drives are hard wired” in everyone, she added. “If we’re going to pit human services against 40,000 years of evolution, evolution will win every time.”

In the “full frame” model, what might look to a traditional case worker as resistance or noncompliance or backsliding can be seen, by contrast, to result from a system that is forcing an unsustainable trade-off on a client who is already in a fragile situation, or even a compliance with a higher sense of self than the case worker imagines.

For Lola, the benefits of having her own apartment were outweighed by the loss of the sense of belonging, purpose, stability and social connectedness that she had experienced at the Y.

“Lola made it back into housing,” Ms. Smyth said. “But here’s what I wish we had done the first time: Celebrate the housing, but say, ‘Let’s think about what you’re going to have to leave behind and see if we can minimize that so that the change is actually worth it to you.’”

What might that have meant in practice? Perhaps the Y could have offered to buy Lola a bus pass if she agreed to return a day or two each week to lead new groups. She would have stayed connected to her community and maintained that all-important sense of purpose, and she could have scheduled her medical appointments on days when she was in the area.

What inhibits this kind of creative problem-solving from emerging more often in systems?

One thing is a mental trap that psychologists call the “fundamental attribution error.” Stated simply, when strangers do things that we see as negative, we tend to attribute it to their characters rather than their circumstances. (By contrast, when we, or people we like, fall short, we tend to attribute it to circumstances.) People living in poverty or dealing with violence or addiction are often seen as “fundamentally different,” Ms. Smyth says, or as broken or deficient and therefore in need of being fixed.

To work around the fundamental attribution error, it’s essential to get nuanced information about people’s situations. Next week’s article will examine how the Full Frame Initiative has helped the St. Louis County Family Court simplify its approach to assessment — focusing on the kind of information that is needed to recognize the role of circumstances, and understanding how court officers can avoid inadvertently forcing youths or families into unsustainable trade-offs.

Another problem is that systems deal with problems in sequence, rather than in an integrated fashion. For instance, when a woman seeks assistance for domestic violence, the initial focus is usually entirely on safety for her and her children. “People experiencing domestic violence are often told by child welfare workers that they need to leave their partner or risk losing custody of their kids,” Ms. Smyth said.

That might seem to make perfect sense. Who can argue with safety first? But other things matter, too. Case workers report a spike in intake for domestic violence at the end of the school year because for many women, the trade-off of disrupting a child’s stability during school isn’t worth the perceived benefits of seeking help. But once school is out, the equation changes.

Ms. Smyth recalled the case of a mother who had been abused and who had a son on the autism spectrum. Finally, she found an aide in his school with whom he bonded.

After years of struggling with his disability, this woman's son was finally doing well. It's not that she wasn't concerned about her safety, but she didn't want to jeopardize his progress by moving to a shelter, which often entails changing schools.

"The case worker may be very compassionate, but she's still going to push her to the shelter," Ms. Smyth said. And that's what happened to the mother. The thinking is additive. First, safety; then add services to deal with the trade-offs; then get the son into another program; then help the mother find a new job, and so on.

The result? The son moved to a new school and started to have behavior problems. The mother watched a year of good work with his aide unravel. So she returned home — not because she wanted to be back with her partner but because she couldn't bear to watch her son lose what he had gained.

Back at the school, however, the aide was assigned to another child. "So she's not back at square one," Ms. Smyth said. "She's at *negative* one. When I've shared this story, many advocates have told me it's very familiar to them."

"When you hear about programs that have some success, and then it drops off, it's not about lack of motivation," Ms. Smyth added. "It's about trade-offs that are too big. People are incredibly motivated to get safe. A woman knows that being choked unconscious is unsafe. But this progress for her son is also incredibly valuable. So what she needs is for her case manager to help her figure out an alternative that holds that piece in place."

Next week, I'll explore how the Full Frame Initiative has been working with government agencies in Massachusetts and Missouri to do just that.

The Art of Humanizing Social Systems

By David Bornstein

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Second of two articles.

When a filmmaker pulls back the camera lens to capture the widest possible image, it's called a full frame. Can social service agencies adopt a similar frame? Can they shift from a focus on isolated needs — safety, housing, health or employment — in favor of a broad view that supports human well-being?

Last week, I [explored](#) the kinds of problems that are created when services try to tackle individual needs in isolation. I looked at how an organization called the [Full Frame Initiative](#) had developed a framework based on [five domains of well-being](#): safety, mastery, stability, social connectedness and meaningful access to relevant resources.

This article looks at how the Full Frame Initiative is partnering with government agencies in Missouri and Massachusetts to integrate this well-being orientation at the system level. The goal is to demonstrate possibilities for system change that could improve social services across the country.

In Missouri, the Full Frame Initiative has been working with state agencies since 2010. Since 2011, one of its partners, the [Division of Youth Services](#), which is responsible for the care and treatment of youths committed to its custody by juvenile courts, [has seen improvements](#) in the academic progress, educational completion and law-abiding rates of youths served.

More recently, the Full Frame Initiative has been [working with St. Louis's family courts](#) since 2016. "I found its approach very restorative," said Ben Burkemper, the family court administrator for St. Louis County. "It addresses the whole person, not just the offense that the juvenile committed."

"All humans strive to have meaningful gas in all five domains," Mr. Burkemper said. "The key is not to force unsustainable trade-offs." He offered the example of a juvenile who is placed on probation and ordered by the court to attend group counseling two evenings a week, while unbeknown to the court, his mother, a single parent, is working two jobs and needs to have her son take care of his siblings on those evenings or risk losing one of her jobs.

“Instead of just saying, ‘You have to make it work,’” Mr. Burkemper said, “the court looks at the youth and his family holistically. ‘O.K., you can’t make the sessions on these evenings. We’ll try to find something for you during the day through another agency.’”

This approach seems sensible. How does it benefit society to force a youth to comply with a court order that imperils his family’s economic security — even if he has committed a crime?

But it takes a culture change to make the system work this way. For family court to avoid forcing trade-offs like these, the front-line staff must understand the family’s situations in significant detail, Mr. Burkemper said. And they must be supported by managers and supervisors who prioritize long-term well-being over short-term responses.

So when Mr. Burkemper began advancing this framework in the family court, he recruited the Full Frame Initiative to train high-level staff members, while enlisting deputy juvenile officers to develop new assessment forms and procedures in line with the five-domains approach. They were the ones who would be dealing with cases every day, so it was essential that they felt they owned the new processes — even if it took a year and a half to roll it all out.

The changes initially met with some resistance, he said, but now staff members say the new approach humanizes families and also saves time. “We’re seeing more clearly how hard it can be for families to comply with court-ordered conditions, not because they are unmotivated or resistant but because of poverty, safety and other considerations,” Michelle Frank, a deputy juvenile officer in the investigations unit of the St. Louis County Family Court, said.

The new assessment process begins by focusing on strengths, Ms. Frank said. An officer might start by asking, “What are you proud of about your child?” rather than jumping into the problems. “When a kid and his family walk into our office, they’re guarded,” she added. “The first few moments of that interview are so important to get their buy-in. If it’s done right, you get to more of the depth of what’s going on.”



The old assessment forms used in the Family Courts in St. Louis



The new assessment forms used in the Family Courts in St. Louis

More depth makes it more likely that court orders will work. For instance, some juveniles fail to attend their court-mandated counseling sessions because it means traveling on bus lines that pass through areas that are dangerous for them. A suspicious youth may be reluctant to share that information. Now court officers are more likely to discover this concern during their assessments — and they can respond by trying to bring programs into neighborhoods where youths live.

If a juvenile's offense involves drugs, it's common for the court to require participation in a drug program. But an assessment may reveal that a youth's ambition is to get a job. "Instead, we'll have them start with a job program," Ms. Frank said. "This gives them more of a sense of control. And when they get the job, they realize they have to be clean."

The five-domains approach can reveal the logic behind behaviors that may look like nothing more than teenage recklessness or delinquency. "All behavior meets a need," Linda Snyder, a deputy juvenile officer in the family services unit of the St. Louis County Family Court, said. "So whether that behavior is adaptive or maladaptive, you have to understand the need it is filling."

A juvenile, she said, may persist with behaviors that keep her in detention because it meets her need for safety better than being at home. Or a student may continue cursing out a teacher because getting kicked out of class serves to avoid the embarrassment of having to read in front of his peers. Or a youth who uses drugs may do so mainly to satisfy the need for social connectedness.

"At the end of the day, negative consequences don't change behavior," Ms. Snyder said. "Change comes through teaching competencies, and incentivizing and celebrating accomplishments. What the Full Frame does is teaches a process for developing interventions that are going to create competencies that will decrease the likelihood that kids will continue to be system involved."

The officers in the family court can act with confidence on their insights because they are working in a system where everyone shares a common language, Mr. Burkemper said.

In Massachusetts, the Full Frame Initiative has been [working for eight years with five state agencies](#), with the goal of preventing survivors of domestic and sexual violence from becoming, or remaining, homeless. "Often for victims of domestic violence, there's a forced trade-off," said Tammy Mello, the former executive director of the Governor's Council to Address Sexual and Domestic Violence in Massachusetts.

Several years ago, Ms. Mello and other department heads who focused on children and families, transitional assistance, housing and homelessness, public health and victims' assistance began meeting periodically to figure out how their systems could become better aligned. In particular, they wanted to stop making things harder for people who were trying to stabilize their lives.

For example, if a mother experiencing domestic violence lost temporary custody of her children because the child welfare department determined that they had to be removed for safety, it would automatically trigger her loss of housing benefits. "It was crazy," Ms. Mello said. "Then you couldn't return the kids to the mom because she'd lost her housing. And the mother would say, 'I can't get housing assistance unless I have my kids back.'" "That's where the five domains came in," Ms. Mello added. "We embraced the idea that although we work in systems with different mandates, we could rally around this framework that's intended to look at what every human being needs to have overall well-being."

In Massachusetts, getting alignment on the well-being framework has required a different approach than in Missouri. For the Full Frame Initiative, it has meant working with an array of state agencies that set standards and policies, as well as with numerous nonprofit agencies that actually provide services for people facing domestic violence or homelessness.

But the well-being orientation is gaining ground. "Two years ago, the state re-procured all of its sexual and domestic violence services — \$40 million per year for 11 years — explicitly focusing on well-being and equity, not just on short-term safety," said Katya Smyth, the Full Frame Initiative's founder. "This has allowed nonprofits for whom this approach makes sense to really lean in and operationalize it — because the incentives and expectations of the government are aligned with what makes sense to them."

Now five state agencies have come together to [pilot an approach to supporting survivors of violence in need of housing](#) that is based on the well-being framework, Linn Torto, the executive director of the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness in Massachusetts, said via email. The same crosscutting focus on well-being, she added, is being applied in the development of a new \$200 million procurement for the family shelter system.

“What’s revolutionary about this,” Ms. Smyth said, “is that it is setting up structures that enable the agencies to focus on what is best for the families rather than on their own individual mandates.”

In addition to its demonstration projects with government systems, the Full Frame Initiative is also developing an institute to work with community activists to bring a well-being orientation to their work solving local problems. The organization has also begun exploring the implications for medicine.

“For older adults, we’re seeing an epidemic of depression, which we’re treating medically as depression,” said Dr. Rachel Broudy, who recently joined the Full Frame Initiative as director of health care transformation after practicing geriatric medicine for 13 years. “Is some of this loneliness a lack of purpose? Or not having a place to give back to society? Or a loss of stability? For older adults, the big thing we focus on is safety. But what does that mean in terms of loss of agency, stability or community? In medicine, we take away so many routines from people. If all we did was try to create equitable access to well-being and do no harm, it would change medicine dramatically.”

“This work isn’t just about better outcomes for individuals,” Ms. Smyth said. “It’s about removing systemic barriers that are holding inequities in place. So much in our society is built on what we think makes us different from one another. This work is about what’s possible when we actually build on, and hold our attention on, what is universal: our needs for well-being.”

David Bornstein is the author of [“How to Change the World,”](#) which has been published in 20 languages, and [“The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank,”](#) and is a co-author of [“Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know.”](#)