

An Interview With Bryan Samuels, Commissioner, ACYF

Ronald C. Hughes, PhD

Bryan Samuels is the Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He was appointed to this position by President Obama in June, 2009. Among his many responsibilities as Commissioner, Mr. Samuels is responsible for federal activities related to the development, management, and oversight of the country's public child welfare system.

Prior to his appointment as Commissioner, Mr. Samuels held a variety of leadership positions in various systems serving children, including as the Chief of Staff of Chicago's public schools, the third largest public school system in the country. His vetting in the field of child welfare has included serving as Deputy Director of Health and Human Services in the State of Nebraska, and a 4-year stint as Director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, the nation's third largest child welfare system.

For those looking at Mr. Samuels' accomplishments, reading his writings, listening to his public discourse, and especially being a part of his private conversations, it becomes clear that he is an especially intelligent and thoughtful man. It also becomes clear that he is, in final measure, committed to two things: public service and rational process.

His commitment to public service may be, in large part, a result of his early history. He spent 12 years in a residential placement for disadvantaged children, Glenwood School for Boys in Chicago. His memories and feelings regarding his early years are mixed. Even the best of dependency institutions is still an institution. But he remains cognizant of the support and opportunities provided by even a less-than-perfect public system of substitute care. With that support, he thrived and took advantage of the opportunities made available to an intellectually curious and resilient young man. Mr. Samuels graduated from Notre Dame with a degree in economics in 1989 and from the Harris School of Public Policy in 1992.

Mr. Samuels explained that the genesis of his commitment to science, empiricism, and rational process is the combined result of his developmental experiences and opportunities, plus the mentorship of a few important people along the way, including Judy Langford and Paula Wolf. Whatever the source, this commitment defines his work.

When Mr. Samuels assumed leadership of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services in 2003, he found himself in a unique position with unique opportunities. His predecessor, Mr. Jess McDonald, had begun a major reform of the state's child welfare system, resulting in a significant

reduction in the number of children placed in residential treatment, an increased number of children maintained in their homes, and foster care being used as a placement resource for children with more serious issues than had been true previously. At the same time, additional financial resources became available by reducing costly residential treatment placements...resources that could be used instead to develop services and programs for children in care. For Mr. Samuels, the question was how to take advantage of this opportunity to best use limited resources to meet the needs of the children in care. Mr. Samuels acknowledged, "Everybody says they want to develop and implement program policy and practice that works. But I wanted to do more than talk the talk. Science had to be brought to bear on providing services to this in-home population."

Mr. Samuels also wanted to change the CPS culture from concentrating on the *residential* part of residential treatment to a focus on the *treatment* part. He said, "We really did move away from thinking of residential and group homes as primarily placement options and, instead, we thought of them as treatment options. We wanted residential treatment to be just that—treatment. We had an expectation that the child would go to the most appropriate treatment program, and the child would get better and get stabilized, and then we would be looking for a family placement rather than a residential placement." This required sophisticated and comprehensive assessments of both the child's needs and the treatment facility's capacities and willingness to meet those needs. Mr. Samuels said, "We went through an elaborate process of looking at the clinical needs of children" and did an analysis of the residential programs to "develop profiles of children who were best served by each of these residential programs." He explained that this information guided placements that weren't ends in themselves, but rather, were made with "the expectation that the child would ultimately go home, or to a relative foster placement, because the residential placement did its job" to prepare the child for a less restrictive placement.



Mr. Samuels explained that research shows us that whatever trauma a child has suffered as a result of maltreatment, it will only be exacerbated if we cause further disruption in his life and if we don't make every effort to maintain as much stability as possible. Thus, he said, within 6 months of the adoption of his reforms in Illinois, the agency had gone "from an average placement of 20 miles to an average placement of 6 miles" from a child's home community. "One goal," he said, "was, whenever possible and appropriate, to keep the child in the same school, close to relatives and close to things and places he is familiar with, to reduce the trauma" of separation and placement.

Mr. Samuels stressed that an important change was the implementation of comprehensive assessment, used, as he said, "up front, so that you had a baseline for all the kids as they entered the front door." He was particularly proud of the use of this data to improve statewide efforts to "rethink the independent living and transitional programs we were operating." Using developmental and assessment data, they were able to place children into one of four different categories of transitional and independent living, based on each child's particular needs and strengths.

Mr. Samuels reported that the program was a success. "We could really target a group of children based upon their assessment needs rather than treating all kids the same." The common thread running through Mr. Samuels' reform success in Illinois was better collection and better use of information—in other words, an evidence-based approach to assessment and service delivery. A phrase Mr. Samuels often uses in conversation is "mining the data." Underpinning his remarkable success were better assessments of the children and families, better assessment of the capacities of residential treatment programs, and most important, a commitment to analyzing and using that information in a rational decision-making process to develop policy and deliver services.

Mr. Samuels has carried his evidence-based approach to solving systemic issues from his earlier work in state government to the national stage as Commissioner of ACYF. He stated, "Just about every child who enters care, his family's parenting skills are weak, and we know our kids enter care with high rates of anxiety or depression...or with developmental or mental health problems, and yet we do not have a set of common go-to strategies to address these problems. We know our kids and our families enter the system with some pretty predictable challenges in front of them, and we need to develop some core competencies around being able to effectively address those issues. That really is the big thing I want to get done."

Mr. Samuels believes there are empirically supported programs and models that have substantial scientific merit, but, for a variety of reasons, they are not being implemented. He sees a three-step process based upon his commitment to good service. He claims we need to, first, find the evidence-informed practices, then identify the critical core competencies that are needed for training, and third,

help the states by supporting implementation to ensure fidelity to each of the models that are introduced.

Bryan Samuels also believes that these efforts at identifying and implementing evidence-based practices will not, by themselves, get the job done. He would like to see his commitment to rationality extended to fiscal management as well. He says, "The second thing I would like to get done is to realign the outcomes that we ask of states with the financing we make available to states. We want an incentive system that reinforces good performance and discourages bad performance. The way the system works today is there is actually a perverse incentive. If you don't run your system well, we end up giving you more money, and if you run your system well, we take money away. We are working to have the financial system reward desired outcomes so that we have a coherent and reinforcing system. We don't have that today."

Mr. Samuels is optimistic and excited about the next several years. He feels those with whom he works in the present administration are very knowledgeable and supportive. That has not always been the case. He tells, with considerable anguish, how he believed he had to leave his job as Child Welfare Director in Illinois prematurely, because the political leadership was so caught up in its own personal and political issues that Mr. Samuels could not count on support in his efforts to reform the child welfare system. However, in spite of the present constricting financial environment, Mr. Samuels believes that with the energy and commitment that is available, a lot can be done to improve the lives of the children and families we all serve.

Mr. Samuels was so excited about the many developmental activities in the Administration for Children, Youth and Families that when asked about a desired legacy, it was difficult for him to narrow it down. Finally, he replied, "I would say my legacy, I hope, would be of the children and families that we serve, being able to look at the system and the way the system treated them, and have them be able to say that there was at least one guy who understood what they needed."

I think he will succeed, because I've never met a person who has tried harder to identify those needs.

Mr. Bryan Samuels will receive the *Pro Humanitate Distinguished Service in Public Child Welfare Administration Award* at the 19th APSAC Annual Colloquium in Philadelphia, July 13–16, 2011.

About the Author

Roland C. Hughes, PhD, is Director of the North American Resource Center for Child Welfare and the Institute for Human Services of Columbus, Ohio. He is the current President of APSAC.