



SHINING LIGHT ON DARK DATA IN CHILD WELFARE

Drugs

Bipolar

Heroin

Shelby Bells

Parent conference

SOCIAL SECURITY

Physical Abuse

Mother

cont...

Alcohol

REPORT CARD - CADE BELLS

Form 1040A (2015)
Tax, credits,
and
payments

Cade Bells

Income Tax Return

Medical

SUMMARY SHEET

Ohio

Relatives

MONTH

Sara Bells

The volume of information available to child welfare social workers has increased dramatically over the past 10-15 years. It is unrealistic for anyone in child welfare to remain constantly up to date on every case, especially when so much of the information is hiding in the dark.

What are the challenges with unstructured—or dark—data? Why do child welfare organizations need to use dark data, and what are the consequences if they don't?

We created this eBook to answer those very questions.



CHILD WELFARE BY THE NUMBERS:



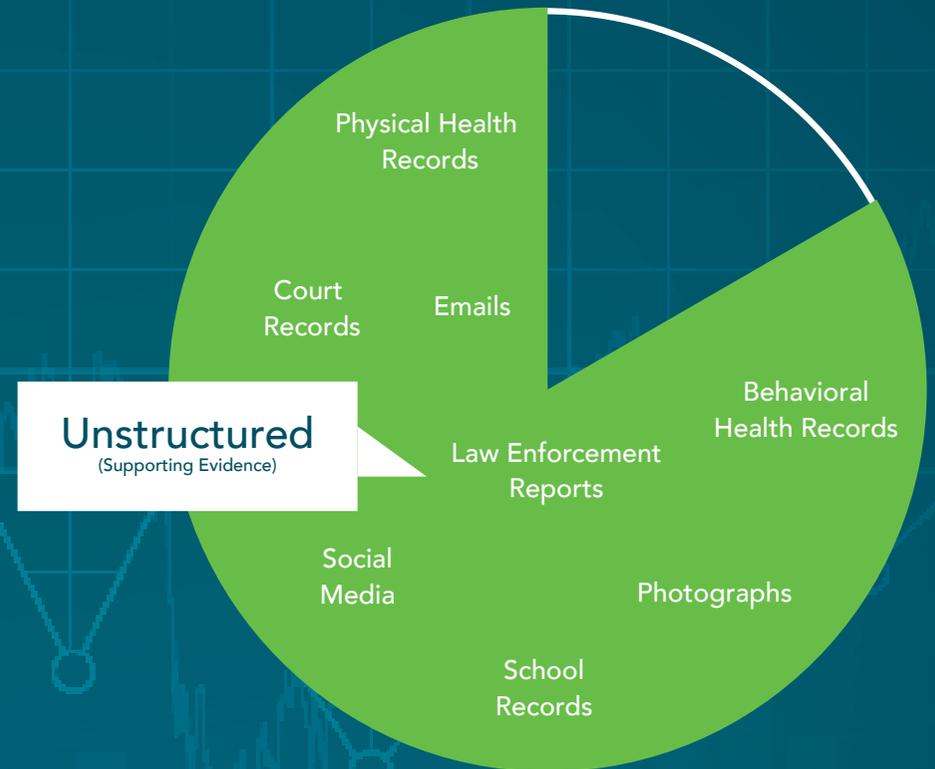
24-31

The average caseload is between 24 and 31 cases.^{i.}



12HR

Due to the sheer volume, breadth, and complexity of a case file, it can take a child welfare worker upwards of 12 hours to review the history of just one case.^{ii.}



80%

of case information is unstructured.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

It is unrealistic to remain constantly up to date on every aspect of every case. Finding specific evidence that will conclusively support a decision can be overwhelming, if not impossible. And without assurance that the evidence even exists, agency staff are often forced to rely on a "gut feeling" to make decisions without complete confidence.

But, when answering to the family, community, policymakers, and judges, the agency director must show irrefutable evidence that the cumulative information available to the agency was used in making every decision.

Child welfare agency directors we work with estimate that more than 80% of the information their agencies collect, process, and store in the course of interacting with the entire ecosystem of a child is not effectively utilized by agency staff when they must make safety decisions for children.



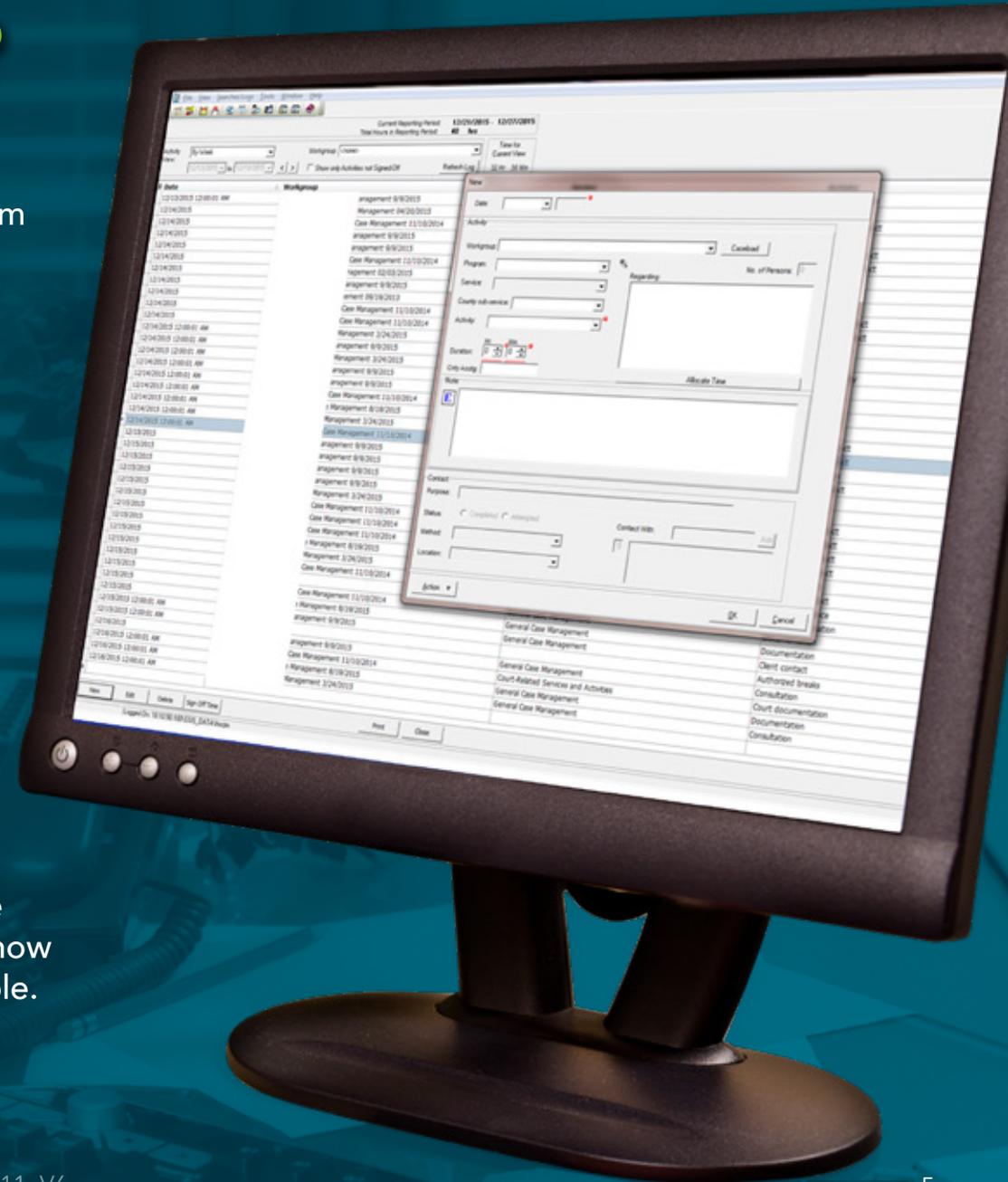
WHAT ABOUT THE SYSTEM OF RECORD?

Many agencies are required to use a system of record such as the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) or Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS).

A system of record is built to store data needed to generate reports for the federal government. It is not necessarily intended to help a social worker work through the case. Even when workers put information into a system of record, it's a synopsis of what happened, not the actual documentation of the event. It summarizes the data; it isn't the data itself.

However, this "dark data" is incredibly relevant to the child, as well as those responsible for the child's safety and well-being, and the most difficult information to manage.

Finding the evidence to support critical decisions should take minutes, not days. Everything the agency has the ability to know about a family should be brought to light as quickly as possible.



WHAT IS DARK DATA?

“Dark data” is typically in the form of documents — paper files, electronic images, or photos—but also includes case notes and other unstructured text.

Dark data is information collected by multiple workers from numerous sources over a long period of time. The information becomes hidden and workers cannot apply it to each decision-making point to plan for and protect the vulnerable children they are working to serve. However, it is some of the most valuable information the organization has even though it is the most difficult for social workers to manage.

Here are just a few examples of dark data in child welfare:

- Captions on photographs
- Law enforcement reports
- Caseworkers' narratives
- Safety assessments
- School records
- Court records
- Social media
- Case plans
- Emails
- Behavioral and physical health records

Need to Learn More About Dark Data?

Watch the webinar, **Uncovering Dark Data in Child Welfare to Improve Outcomes.**

WHY IS ACCESSING DARK DATA CRITICAL IN CHILD WELFARE?

Helping social workers and supervisors make better decisions throughout the life of the case requires making use of the mountains of dark data hidden in the local case file itself. Most of it is frequently stored in file folders or bankers boxes, either in a storeroom, on a desk, or in the trunk of a car.

If workers are unable to access and use the information they need while caring for and protecting vulnerable children, there could be fatal consequences.

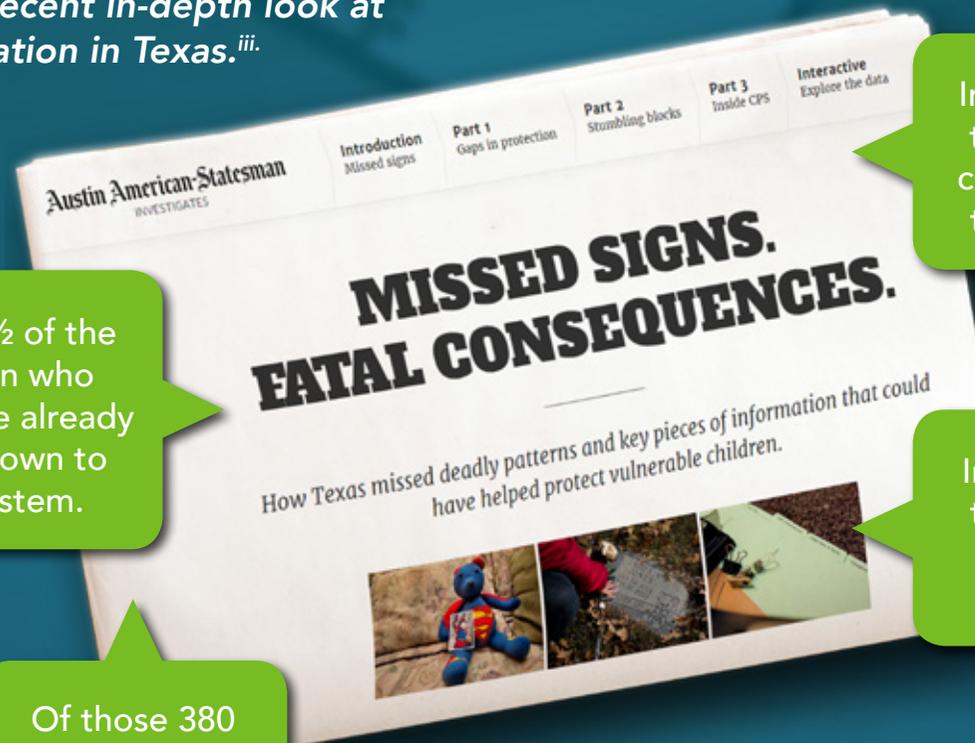
In fact, here are some statistics pulled from a recent in-depth look at the situation in Texas.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nearly ½ of the children who died were already in or known to the system.

Of those 380 fatalities, more than ¼ had been the subject of an investigation at least 3 times.

In one instance, the family was contacted more than 20 times.

In 12 instances, the family was seen 10 or more times.



This isn't just a Texas issue. All over the country, child welfare workers don't have an effective way to access, digest, and manage all the information to quickly get an overview of the whole story.

TURNOVER DEEPENS THE DARK DATA PROBLEM

The dark data problem is compounded by the high turnover rate of social workers. Every time a worker leaves, the new worker is tasked with picking up each case where the previous worker left off.

The new worker is trying to learn, but it takes years of experience to effectively assess dangers and risks facing each child. The new worker often re-collects information that already exists, or repeats steps that have already been taken.

This constantly resets the starting point for the family, keeping them in the system longer than necessary and negatively impacting their ability to make progress.

To learn about the situation, a new worker has to ask for information. Every time a worker asks a family to repeat information, the worker feels embarrassed and upset when asking the family to relive the trauma and embarrassment of the situation that the worker wishes she or he already knew.

“
National average turnover rate
in child welfare is estimated
at 30%, with individual agency
rates as high as 65%.^{iv}

— Casey Family Programs

”



THE CRITICAL ISSUE

Combing through all the information can take days, even if you know what you're looking for.

What happens when you don't know?

When you're new to the case?

When you're new to the job?

When you need it now?

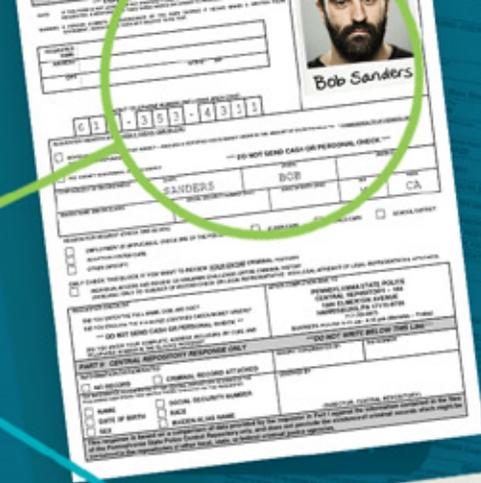
SO, WHAT DOES CHILD WELFARE **REALLY** NEED?

A real-time view into the whole story of each child and the family to make confident decisions about child safety.

Imagine if...

- Social workers know the critical details of a family's whole story. Period. No guessing.
- Supervisors have time to clinically consult with workers and not put out fires all day.
- Agency directors are confident about every decision made in the agency.

To bring this vision to life, let's take a look at three common scenarios all centered around a fictional child, Cade Bells, who has special needs.



SOCIAL WORKER ON CALL

It's 2 am and I'm on call. I get called to the home of a 7-year-old boy, Cade Bells, to investigate a report of abuse. I've never worked with the family, but discover I need to immediately find a safe place for this child who has special needs. How do I find him a safe place and the right place for the night?

Today

I can view a list of some of the people who are part of the case from the face sheet or SACWIS, but I don't know how they are connected. To find a stable guardian, or just a supportive resource, I really need to sift through years of paper files scattered around the office or in storage, but I have no time. I have to get Cade in a safe place right now.

Imagine if...

With just a click or two, I can see a summary of people related to the case and how each person is connected to Cade and why. Now I can determine how they can best help, or if they are a danger to the child, because I can then drill down to view the actual case content that references each person. In this case, I see on a recent school report that the child's aunt, Hattie Lindsey, would be the best person to care for Cade. In addition to Aunt Hattie having helped him in the past, I can see that she has the necessary skills to care for a special needs child.



SUPERVISOR

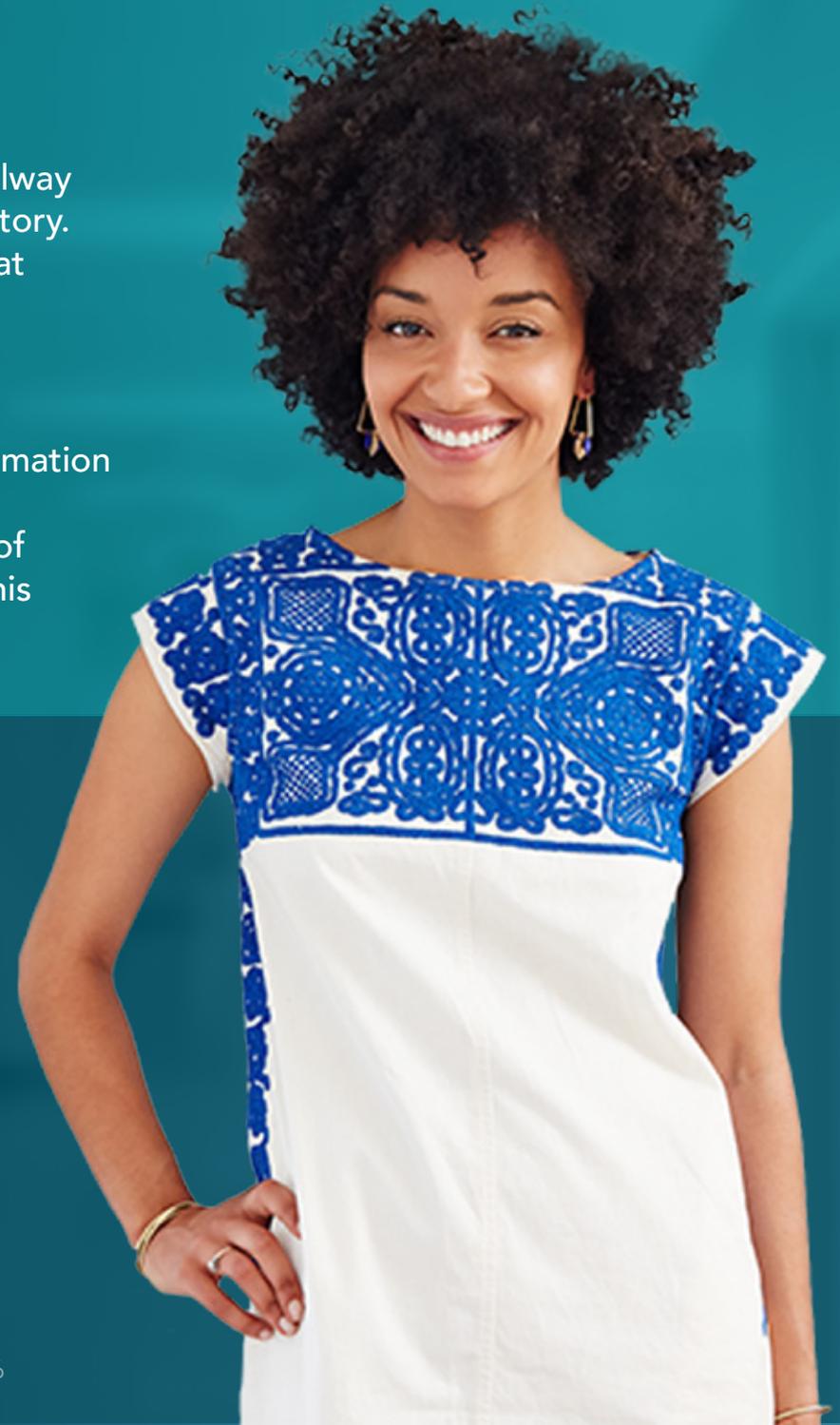
I am a supervisor, and one of my new workers stops me in the hallway for advice on a newly opened case containing several years of history. I need to assist the worker. How do I identify the key activities that occurred during the last investigation?

Today

It can easily take me 2-3 hours of case file review just to find information about a specific event, let alone all of the events. I've been the supervisor for 8 years, so at least I'm able to rely on my memory of the family, but what about what I don't remember? And what if this case is newly assigned to my unit?

Imagine if...

With just a few clicks, I'm able to see a timeline of all the events and activities related to each time this family has had contact with the agency. From there I'm able to click on an event and quickly learn that Cade's mom, Shelly Bells, was charged with a DUI and arrested for heroin possession the last time we got involved, which led to an emergency placement of Cade. Now I can help coach my worker on what to look for during the new investigation, so she can quickly decide if Cade remaining with mom is an option, or if we need to find placement.



NEW SOCIAL WORKER

I am a newly assigned social worker taking over an ongoing case from a coworker who just resigned. She was in the middle of assessing the case, and I need to get up to speed before my first home visit today. How do I learn about the underlying issues in the case?

Today

I review as much of the case as I have time for, but it would take me days just to read every document I can find, let alone try to make sense of it all. I may not even know where to look. Often times our old cases get sent to a storage unit. If I can catch my supervisor, she will try her best to help, but she juggles so many workers and so many cases that she is also unable to quickly recall the details. Without knowing all the background on this case, I often end up asking the family the same questions the last worker asked, or I don't ask the right questions. This is embarrassing for me and frustrating for them. And it just slows things down to a crawl.

Imagine if...

With just a few clicks, I'm able to see a list of all the most important topics referenced in this case file. For each topic, I can quickly drill down to read the specific documents that are related to that topic. There were some topics that I expected to see, but there were some other topics that made me curious, like "Bipolar." I now have a much better idea of what I need to look for when I talk with Mom. I knew she has struggled with drug abuse, but I didn't realize she also had significant mental health issues. This helps me quickly determine what services she needs so I can determine how to best protect Cade.



SOCIAL WORKERS NEED A SYSTEM OF ENGAGEMENT

To turn the vision into reality, social workers can leverage a system of engagement in the field and in the office to better manage information throughout the life of a case file.

Promote data quality: Facilitates a bi-directional data exchange with other systems, which reduces duplicate entry and eliminates the potential for human error.

Increase productivity: Allows an agency to repurpose up to 2 hours per social worker, per day, by minimizing time spent on administrative functions to maximize time interacting with clients.

Improve program outcomes: Eliminates redundant work with innovative automated functions, allowing social workers to do more high-value work with families to reduce trauma.

Demonstrate compliance: Facilitates an agency's ability to demonstrate compliance on both federal and state reporting requirements and mandates.

Reduce turnover: Equips agency staff with the tools and information they need to succeed, reducing burnout, stress, and other pressures placed upon overworked social workers.



NOW THAT YOU KNOW DARK DATA, WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

Child welfare organizations can only benefit from dark data by finding and using it.

Here's what we recommend:

Find your dark data. Make a list of all the people and organizations that send you information. Think outside the box. Don't forget emails, behavioral health records, social workers' notes, or social media posts.

Eliminate paper. Agencies have to have an electronic document management system to capture and store the documents and data they collect every day.

Be able to scan in real-time. Agencies need to have a system in place that enables real-time document collection and data gathering from internal and external sources, such as law enforcement or hospitals.

Find the right tools to surface dark data. The right tools can help agencies turn dark data into insight that can be used to make more confident decisions.

An emerging solution called case discovery can help you surface dark data.

Traverse^v automatically analyzes the entire case file—including the dark data. It surfaces dark data through a child welfare lens so social workers are informed about prevalent topics, important people connected with the client, and key events impacting the case. Traverse helps child welfare workers understand the whole picture of the case to ensure child safety and improve outcomes.

ABOUT NORTHWOODS

We believe the best predictor of a child's future safety is a thorough understanding of child's detailed history. Northwoods' solutions surface key information workers need to make confident decisions about child safety. Our software solutions are designed around social workers, not simply data collection. Our solutions automate the flow of client and case information based on how social workers throughout the agency need to use it.

Connect with us!



Sources

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- ii. Jacob Meetze, Intake Investigator, Beaufort County Department of Social Services
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- iv. "How does turnover affect outcomes and what can be done to address retention?" Casey Family Programs, Dec. 29, 2017. <https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs-and-retention-strategies/>
- v. Traverse: Content Collection and Case Discovery Solution. <http://www.teamnorthwoods.com/Products/Traverse>