



2010

Reforming Child Welfare. Olivia Golden. Reviewed by Leroy H. Pelton.

Leroy H. Pelton
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pelton, Leroy H. (2010) "*Reforming Child Welfare.* Olivia Golden. Reviewed by Leroy H. Pelton.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol37/iss3/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



Wilson concludes his book, as he has done previously, by advancing a policy perspective that he frankly states now departs from his previous call for universal rather than targeted programs. Although he doesn't clearly spell out specific approaches, he now states that the problems of impoverished African Americans are so severe that frank discussions about race and poverty are needed to undo the consequences of racial subjugation.

Marguerite G. Rosenthal, Salem State College (Emerita)

Olivia Golden, *Reforming Child Welfare*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press, 2009. \$29.50 papercover.

The field of child protection has had a long and problematic history. Despite decades of countless "reforms" at both the federal and state levels, our public child welfare system remains beleaguered and dysfunctional, reeling from crisis to crisis. Within the past 15 years alone, due to child welfare litigation resulting in consent decrees or settlement agreements, public child welfare agencies in the majority of states have been placed temporarily under court supervision or surveillance.

In 2001, Olivia Golden took on the task of heading up the extremely troubled District of Columbia child protection agency. In this book, she describes her experiences and accomplishments in that role. She led the agency out of federal court receivership through "major improvements in the number of adoptions, the timeliness of abuse and neglect investigations, the proportion of children with up-to-date service plans, and the number of young children in family settings, rather than group homes." She and her staff sharply reduced worker case-loads, instituted rigorous new licensing standards for group-care facilities while closing one in the process, and eliminated children's overnight stays in the agency's office building. They closed three emergency shelters, increased the use of kinship foster care, and improved the drastically inadequate computerized information system.

Golden examines two other examples of what she calls success stories of child welfare turnarounds, in Alabama and Utah, where the state child welfare agencies had been under

court settlement. In Alabama, litigation was begun in 1988 and court oversight was finally ended in 2007. As a result of its "reform," Golden states, Alabama's "child abuse reports are investigated promptly, social workers carry fewer cases, children move around less from placement to placement, and many locations offer an array of family services to fill the gap between 'an aspirin and brain surgery' for families." In Utah, litigation filed in 1993 was finally terminated in 2007. Accomplishments included a large increase in the number of caseworkers, reduction in caseload sizes, extensive caseworker training, improvements in data collection, and "high-quality provision of health services to foster children."

Golden is rightly proud of her accomplishments during her three-year stint heading the District of Columbia's child welfare agency. She is also correct in praising improvements like those described above that might reduce the suffering of children and families. However, by the spring of 2009, the District's agency was on its fourth director in the five years after Golden's departure. In 2008, six workers and supervisors were fired for mishandling a child abuse investigation after four children were found murdered by their mother. Subsequently, child abuse and neglect reports rose sharply, worker vacancies increased, recruitment lagged, and the backlog of overdue investigations shot up to 1,600 within a few months' time, double the number when Golden left. A contempt motion was filed contending that "the District's executive leadership has allowed the child welfare system to return to a dysfunctional state." Yet the only conclusion that Golden draws is that "reform in the District, as elsewhere, is clearly the work of many years, even decades."

In Alabama, from 2002 to 2006, while the agency was still under court surveillance, the foster care population rose by 22 percent. In Utah, the number of foster care entries did not increase during that same period, but the foster care population rose by 20 percent anyway. And, although the foster care population nationally has grown appreciably over the past few decades, there has been no evidence of any reduction in the rate of child fatalities due to abuse and neglect (it might even have risen), of any other increased protection of children, or of any better outcomes for children upon entering adulthood. The child welfare system's century-old mission to protect

children and preserve families is belied by these facts as well as by that system's ongoing incapacity to make reasonable efforts to prevent unnecessary foster care placements.

Golden reviews some of the recent research on preventive services, insightfully identifies many of the most important qualities and actions of good leadership and management, and competently discusses the use of information to guide action. She also discusses the use and value of performance measures (although one might argue that here there is too little focus on actual outcomes, as opposed to process). But while she does identify some of the structural flaws that obstruct the development of a preventive and family preservation orientation, she sees them as correctable within the current system.

The child welfare system in the United States, as elsewhere, is driven, structured, and dominated by a reactive reporting law approach to child protection, an approach that has come under increasing criticism by a growing number of child welfare experts. Rather than the continued tinkering with the present fundamentally dysfunctional system, they are calling for alternative structures that would be more proactive, more reliant upon and supportive of preventive orientations to family preservation and child safety, and less reactive, blame-oriented, and coercive than the current system.

Olivia Golden served as the top federal child welfare official during the Clinton administration and is currently a fellow at a leading "think tank," the Urban Institute. In the former position, she had the opportunity to view the big picture, and in the latter she now has the opportunity to think and reflect outside the box. But if Golden has yet pondered the deep structural roots of the inadequate outcomes of the current system, or the mere possibility that the system itself should be replaced or that alternative systems can be envisioned, there is little evidence of it in this book. At this point in our child welfare system's dismal history, what is needed is not just good management, but better imagination.

Leroy H. Pelton, University of Nevada, Las Vegas