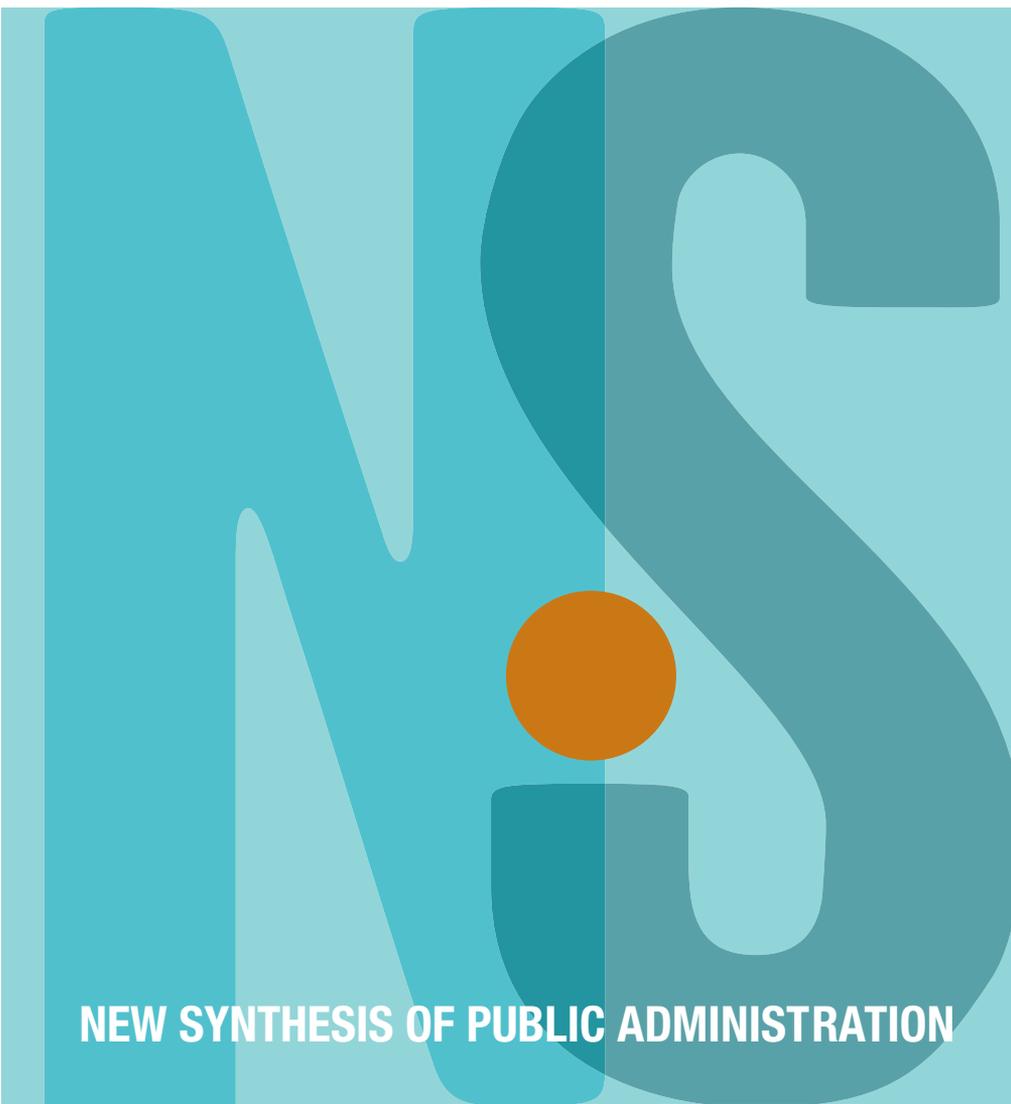


NS LIVE CASE SERIES 2017: **Youth Protection Amsterdam Region** **Every Child Safe Forever**

Marc Dinkgreve



NEW SYNTHESIS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Context

In 2008 Youth Protection Amsterdam Region was responsible for providing assistance and protection to 10,000 children in the Greater Amsterdam region. Its main goal is to protect children and youth from various forms of abuse and neglect.¹ The Agency works to protect children at risk and provide them with support, warranting their safety. Traditionally the work was divided in three separated silos: social workers (voluntary care), legal guardians and parole officers, depending on the issue at hand.

The first decade of the 21st century presented serious challenges for agencies providing child services. Services grew in specialisation and complexity, and were not followed in pace by management and coordination aspects. As a result, challenges related to growing bureaucratisation, and fragmentation, were observed within similar service systems.²

In the Netherlands, several episodes regarding the death of children under state care have drawn the country's consternation, increasing pressure for improvements in the sector. Such was the case in the death of the three-year-old Savanna, in 2004. Both mother and stepfather were convicted of murder, and for the first time in the Netherlands, a legal guardian was charged in criminal court.^{3,4} This case, in particular, became an emblematic representation of the growing shortcomings of the service.

Growing political and public pressure called for enhancement of services and accountability over protection agencies. In 2008, the crisis reached a peak as fragmentation and bureaucratisation increased friction and decreased efficiency, while budgetary restrictions pushed the agency near bankruptcy.

Fiscal deficits added to operational difficulties, such as waiting time for first contact and problems with family situation risk assessment.⁵ Under highlighted supervision by the youth and health inspectorate, aggravation from both outside stakeholders (regional authority and municipalities) and from within (board of directors and employee council), culminated in the CEO's resignation.⁶

A new CEO was appointed in 2009 with great immediate challenges. On the political perspective, the demands for significant improvement regarding the list of children waiting for care continued, so did budget restrictions that threatened the agency's capacity. On the management perspective, the agency struggled to cope with an over-stressed relation with the network of partner organisations that also faced the constraints imposed by increasingly

1 M. Dinkgreve, M. Pröhl, J. Bosse. Messbare Erfolg und systemweite Veränderung. *Innovatieve Verwaltung* No. 11 (December, 2017): 14-17 Springer. www.innovatieve-verwaltung.de

2 J. S. M. van Veelen et al., "Embedding the Notion of Child- and Family-Centered Care into Organizational Practice: Learning from Organizational Visioning," *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 11, no. 2 (March 15, 2017): 231-59, doi:10.1080/15548732.2016.1267068.

3 Aida Edemariam, "After Savanna," *The Guardian*, January 12, 2008, sec. Child Protection, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/dec/01/child-protection-baby-p-netherlands>.

4 It is worth noticing that the legal guardian was acquitted after appeal.

5 Scott Douglas, "The Child Protection Agency", *The Value of Public Value*, Aveum, May 2015.

6 OECD, "Working with Change: Systems Approaches to Public Sector Challenges," Preliminary Version (OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2017).

complex processes and insufficient budget. In addition dealing with a demotivated employees, caught between good intentions to help children and overwhelming processes of report and accountability.

The growing complexity of the services provided and the concern in documenting every action and contact between service providers and families had dysfunctional consequences. Red-tape and bureaucratic processes led staff to spend long periods time filling multiple reports per case (some of which beyond hundreds of pages). As a result, staff would dedicate up to 16 hours per week in following prescribed protocols and filling extensive case reports per child.⁷

Reconnecting with public purpose

The problems affecting the Youth Protection Amsterdam Region had different sources. Financial and bankruptcy threat, bureaucratic dysfunction, lack of focus on results, and regulatory oriented leadership were translated in low employee satisfaction, low public and stakeholder confidence, and finally, a less safe environment for children.⁸

It became clear for the CEO that “Qualified professionals and committed politicians tried their very best to help children in need. But that doesn’t work if the system itself is broken”.⁹ It was necessary to go further from traditional managerial practices and provide changes that could affect the organisation on a systemic level.



The CEO supported the claims of a group of professionals advocating for a sharp transformation in the service methodology. A pilot project was initiated, which would eventually lead to a transformation of the whole organisation. An inclusive bottom-up participation of professionals helped the organisation to revise and to reconnect with its main purposes and objectives, rooted in its new mission statement of “Every child safe forever”.

To accomplish its goals and to stop transgenerational incident recurrence,¹⁰ the agency re-designed the main aspects of its services. It used recent scientific research on working with families (one family, one plan, one worker) and to define a clear pedagogical vision also based on childrens rights (the UNCRC); and reached for consultancy on the Vanguard Method¹¹ to inspire the process of change and reflection over procedures. The organisation designed a specific care practice framework, the Intensive

7 Scott Douglas, “The Child Protection Agency - part 1, The Value of Public Value, Aveum, May 2015.”

8 Marc Dinkgreve and Sigrid van de Poel, “In-Depth Youth Protection Agency Amsterdam” (8th Quality Conference - Strengthening the capacity of public administration in tackling current and future challenges, Luxembourg, 2015).

9 Scott Douglas, “The Child Protection Agency - part 1, The Value of Public Value, Aveum, May 2015.”

10 Youth Protection Amsterdam Region, “Every Child Safe Forever (ECSF Project) - The Development of Relentless Family Case Management and the End of Parole and Other Court Orders,” in European Public Sector Award 2015 - The Public Sector as Partner for a Better Society, ed. Julia Bosse et al. (Maastricht: European Institute of Public Administration, 2015), 126.

Family Case Management (IFCM),¹² a new general childcare approach in consonance with the Functional Family Parole and Probation Services (FFP).¹³ The newly developed approach was informed and coordinated with partner organizations, health services, service providers, and particularly intended to better inform judges in deciding about court measures and paroles along with the district attorney/prosecutors office.

Citizen-centric care – “the whole system in the room”

Using the Vanguard Method, always from the clients’ perspective, issues were approached from a reflective perspective to understand the main problems, further designing an appropriate plan to implement changes.¹⁴ The new approach abandoned excessive processes, and implemented a purpose-oriented care, focusing on child safety as the main result. The substitution of the standard care for a tailored approach also meant ending the problem-driven care where families were exposed to several different professionals (sometimes up to 20). Instead, the new process advocated the ‘one family - one plan - one worker’ approach.¹⁵ The previously mentioned silos were busted.

This new approach provided a closer and more comprehensive interaction between worker and family. Instead of having several different plans per child and from the perspective of different silos, the approach consolidated a single family plan. The Intensive Family Case Management (IFCM)¹⁶ system consolidated the idea of having one case manager responsible for the whole family, representing the central interlocutor between family and care providers.

This approach encouraged professionals to regard care from the user perspective, identifying particular strengths of families and engaging them actively in the process of care. Multidisciplinary team meetings were held weekly to discuss experiences and to provide support for the field activities. The goals of the family and services allocated were also evaluated every

11 The Vanguard Method regards organisations as complex adaptive systems that require a holistic approach, as an alternative to traditional functional structures. In addition, customer demand is the central point guiding the redesign of organisational structures and processes. The redesign follows an organic self-managed team action toward intervention on business processes always in the perspective of adding value for the customer. The operationalisation of the approach follow a ‘check-plan-do’ action structure. For further information see: Ayham A.M. Jaaron and Chris J. Backhouse, “Service Organisations Resilience through the Application of the Vanguard Method of Systems Thinking: A Case Study Approach,” *International Journal of Production Research* 52, no. 7 (April 3, 2014): 2026-41.

12 Inge Busschers, Leonieke Boendermaker, and Marc Dinkgreve, “Validation and Operationalization of Intensive Family Case Management: A Delphi Study,” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 33, no. 1 (February 2016): 69-78, doi:10.1007/s10560-015-0403-7.

13 van Veelen et al., “Embedding the Notion of Child- and Family-Centered Care into Organizational Practice.”

14 Dinkgreve and van de Poel, “In-Depth Youth Protection Agency Amsterdam.”

15 Ibid.

16 The IFCM was organised in levels of analysis, in the method level: family-oriented; engagement and motivation; incorporate network resources; relational focus; focus on child safety; generalisation of change. In the procedural level: intensive case management; orderly and systematic process; transparency and client involvement. And finally in the organisational level: work as a team. Further information about the conceptual approach and operationalisation of the practices may be found in: Busschers, Inge, Leonieke Boendermaker, and Marc Dinkgreve. “Validation and Operationalization of Intensive Family Case Management: A Delphi Study.” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 33, no. 1 (February 2016): 69-78.

six weeks, with “the whole system in the room”. In these meetings the role of the case worker, “gezinsmanager” in Dutch (gezin = family) focuses on facilitating the change process by targeting on the efforts and results of the family with their own support system and professional service providers rather than talking about their problems and struggles.

The practice bears citizens as both the central purpose of care, and as co-producers of value (child-care outcomes). It aims at a strengths-base care provision, identifying and leveraging positive aspects of family relations. Putting citizens (children and families) as the central purpose of care helps identifying the fundamental aspects of service provision apart from minor aspects.

In 2011, the method and IFCM practices were first tested as a pilot, consisting of six teams from 5 to 7 case managers, one psychologist, and one team manager. After the success of the pilot, the organisation was gradually rolled into the new approach. The transition lasted more than a year, to finally be completed in 2013.

The new approach demanded much more focus on direct contact with families. Case managers were expected to dedicate around 80% of the time in contact with families.¹⁷ To facilitate interaction, the Agency provided staff with communication technology (smartphones, laptops, public transport cards, etc.). In addition, the workplace was adapted to a more casual and open environment that privileged interactive spaces for gatherings, and brought together personnel from 16 different locations.

Overall, the change process started in 2009 and was gradually implemented until 2013, evolving and adapting to the experience. But change is a continuous process, and the methods used to support initial change kept being used to promote specific advancements over time, renovating the meaning of the check-plan-do method.

Achieving better public outcomes

The positive results observed in the pilot were gradually transferred to the whole organisation as more teams started to adopt the new approach. Furthermore, the results observed between 2012 and 2015 were impressive. Within 3 years the Agency reduced 75% of unnecessary reporting.¹⁸ Employee satisfaction grew significantly, surpassing considerably the national average.¹⁹

The transformations in the logic of the workplace also translated into savings. The total annual reduction of 32% was observed in facilities costs (including IT). The operational costs of the new approach also helped to reduce spending, as the costs of taking care of an entire family were slightly higher than taking care of just one child. Costs per user dropped by 22% and customer satisfaction increased from 5.8 to 7.5²⁰ (on an 11 point-scale).

¹⁷ Benedict Wauters and Marc Dinkgreve, “Improving the quality of public service and reducing costs: lessons from the youth protection agency of Amsterdam (Netherlands).”

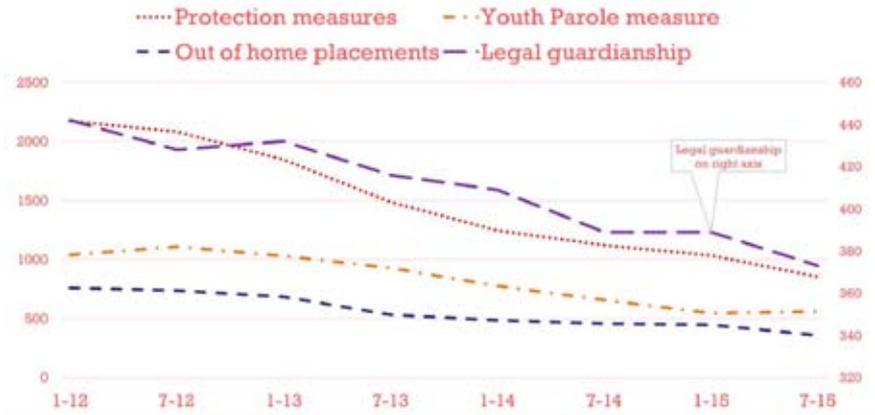
¹⁸ Dinkgreve and van de Poel, “In-Depth Youth Protection Agency Amsterdam.”

¹⁹ OECD, “Working with Change: Systems Approaches to Public Sector Challenges.”

²⁰ Ibid.

The operational outcomes were observed in the number of cases that legal instruments were needed to enforce parental cooperation that was reduced by 60%, and the number of children forcibly removed from families dropped by 50%²¹, as shown in Figure 2. The Agency linked these impressive results to the impact that new approaches had in allowing pre-emptive and early-stage risk detection. Expenditure also dropped steeply from € 53 million in 2009, to € 33 million in 2013.²² The results were so significant that even comparing the services provided by other childcare services in the Netherlands became increasingly difficult.

Figure 2: Reduction in court measures since 2012.²³



Some challenges still remain. The services provided by Youth Protection Amsterdam Region and outcomes changed so much, that the comparison to different services providers for establishing common performance targets became a challenge. New service approach and results put the agency in a particular start point level of difficult comparison to other service providers.²⁴

Additionally, employees assimilated the internalisation of such different routines, and the adaptation to a totally different work in different ways and levels. Thus, the work in changing the organisational culture presents a constant work in progress. In addition, changing behaviours in partner organizations and different participants is also a challenge. In the words of a family worker, “All my clients have my mobile number [...] But I was recently working with a foster care provider who did not want to give even me her mobile number, let alone her clients”.²⁵

21 Youth Protection Amsterdam Region, “Every Child Safe Forever (ECSF Project) - The Development of Relentless Family Case Management and the End of Parole and Other Court Orders.”

22 Douglas, “The Child Protection Agency - Part 2, The Value of Public Value, Aveum, May 2015”

23 Adapted from OECD, “Working with Change: Systems Approaches to Public Sector Challenges,” 80.

24 OECD, “Working with Change: Systems Approaches to Public Sector Challenges.”

25 Douglas, “The Child Protection Agency,” 10.

Overall, the results obtained were quite impressive and recognition followed. In 2014 Youth Protection Amsterdam received the Dutch Public Sector Award and in 2015, the European Institute of Public Administration awarded the initiative with the European Public Sector Award in the Local Government Category. In addition, the case became a reference for other cities and regions addressing similar service issues, being emulated in initiatives from Zeeland, The Hague, and Odense (Denmark). In 2017 Youth Protection Amsterdam started new initiatives in the area of Greater Nijmegen and Greater Eindhoven. Currently almost 25% of the municipalities in the Netherlands work with IFCM.

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