

Rewiring Leadership Around the Right Signal



Kristen Cox

Former Presidential appointee. Former executive director for three governors. Perhaps best known for orchestrating a 35 percent improvement across Utah's \$20B executive branch. Founder and former executive director of the David Eccles School of Business' Initiative on Government Improvement. Founder & CEO of Epiphany Associates, LLC—a specialty training and consulting firm. Board member. Author. International thought leader.



Strategy & Tactics in State Government

1. Employment-First TANF Programs

Strategic focus: Move recipients from welfare to work quickly

Common Tactics:

- Mandatory job participation through programs like VIEW or LaJET
- Short-term skills training and job search assistance
- Transitional support like childcare and transportation
- Partnerships with local employers or workforce boards

Strategy & Tactics in State Government

2. Unified Digital Portals for Public Benefits

Strategic focus: Simplify access and reduce administrative burden

Common Tactics:

- One-stop portals for SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, etc.
- Real-time eligibility tools and automated workflows
- Mobile-friendly platforms with multilingual access
- Integration of case management systems

Strategy & Tactics in State Government

3. Behavioral Health Integrated with Family Services

Strategic focus: Stabilize families by addressing mental health and addiction.

Common Tactics:

- Recovery-to-reunification programs (e.g., Lighthouse)
- Telehealth expansion and mobile crisis teams
- Peer support and family case coordination
- Rural access strategies for high-need populations

Strategy & Tactics in State Government

4. Structural and Eligibility System Reform

Strategic focus: Improve responsiveness and reduce system fragmentation.

Common Tactics:

- Merging of agencies (e.g., North Dakota, West Virginia)
- Decentralized service hubs and streamlined staffing
- Upgraded eligibility tech and real-time data use
- Legislative restructuring for clearer accountability

Medicaid Example

Medicaid Per Member Per Month

Cancer screenings for women	1.4% growth per year
Preventative care	0.4% growth per year
Child immunizations	0.3% growth per year
Medicaid PMPM	4.4% growth per year
PMPM in 2000 = \$393	PMPM in 2020 = \$624

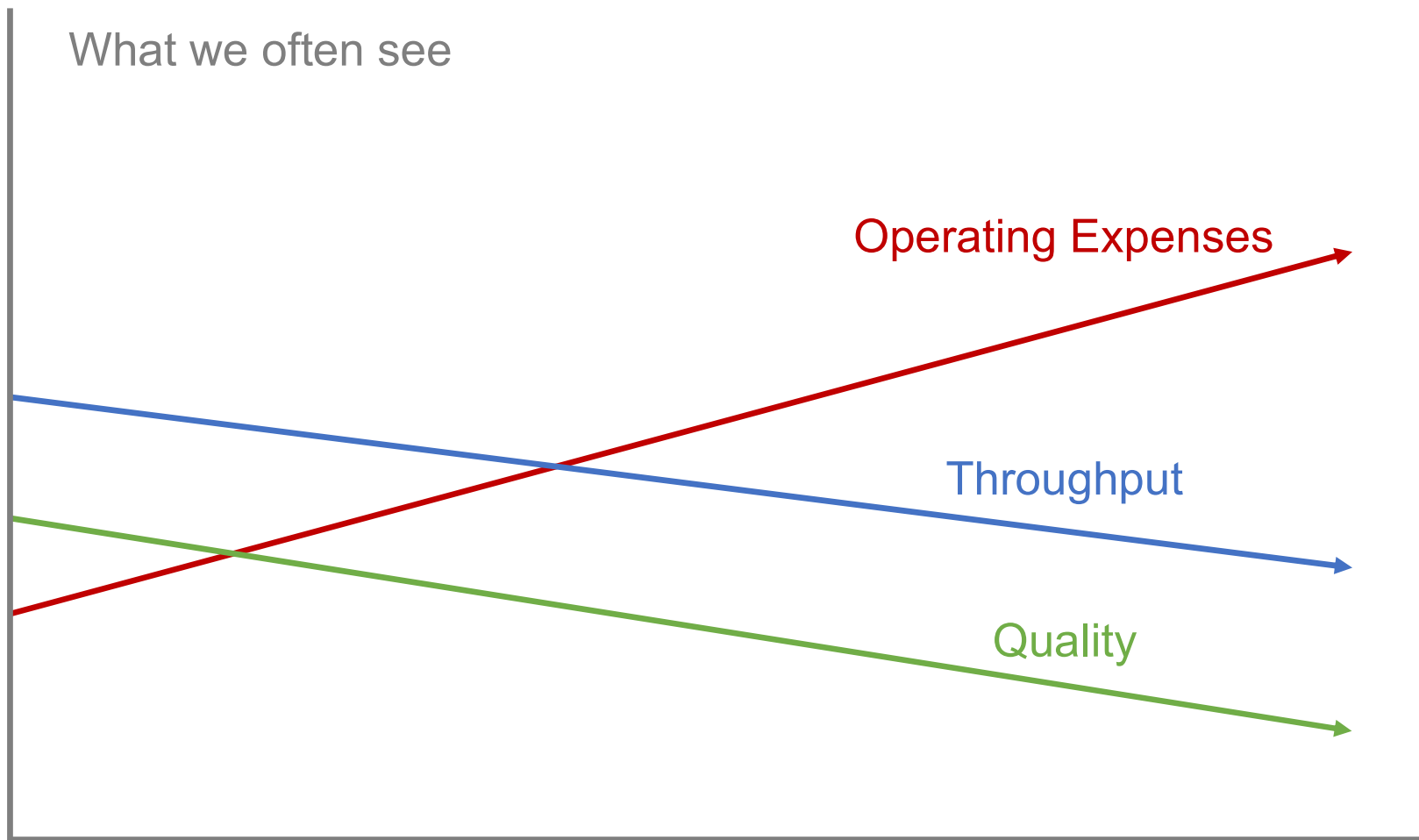
What we want to see

Throughput

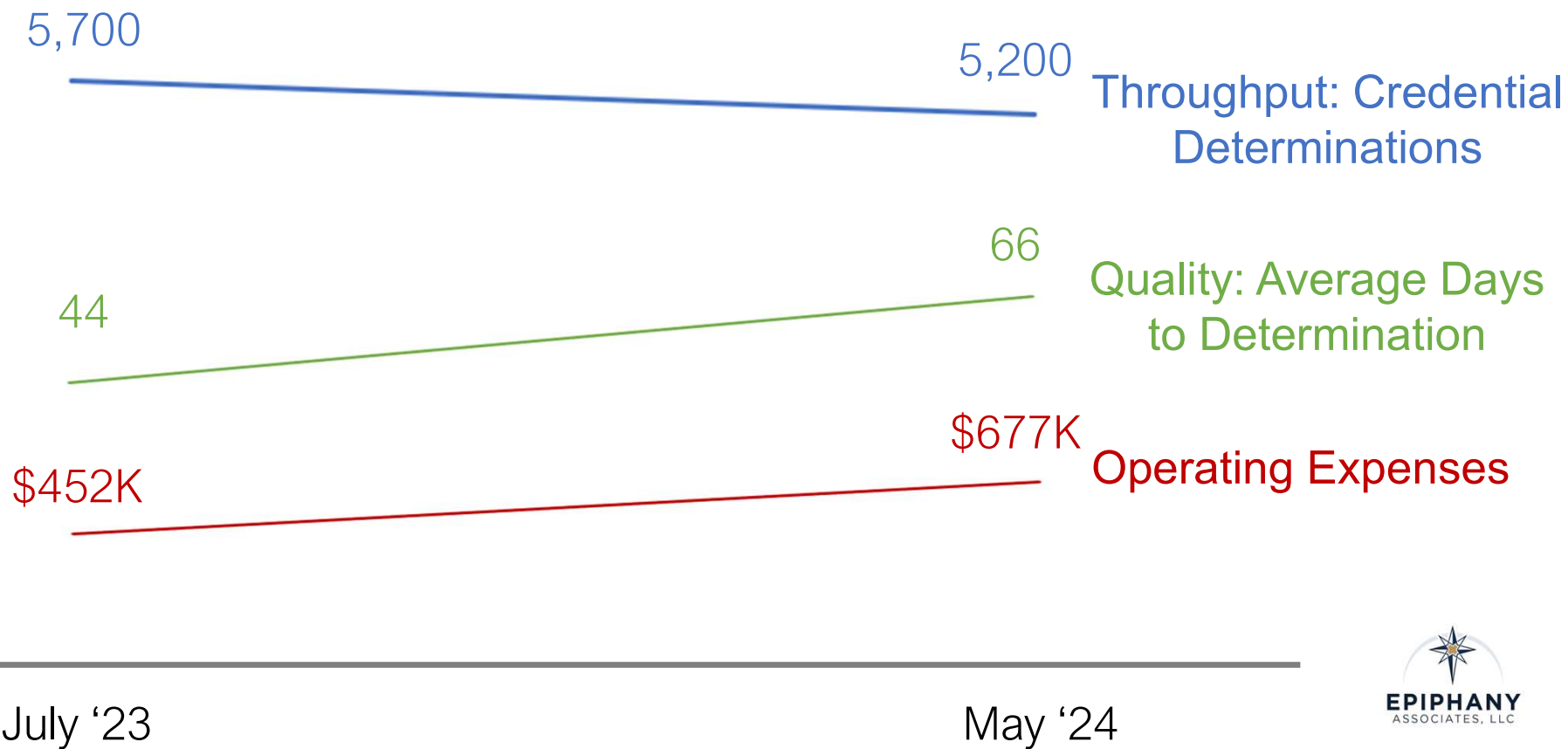
Quality

Operating Expenses

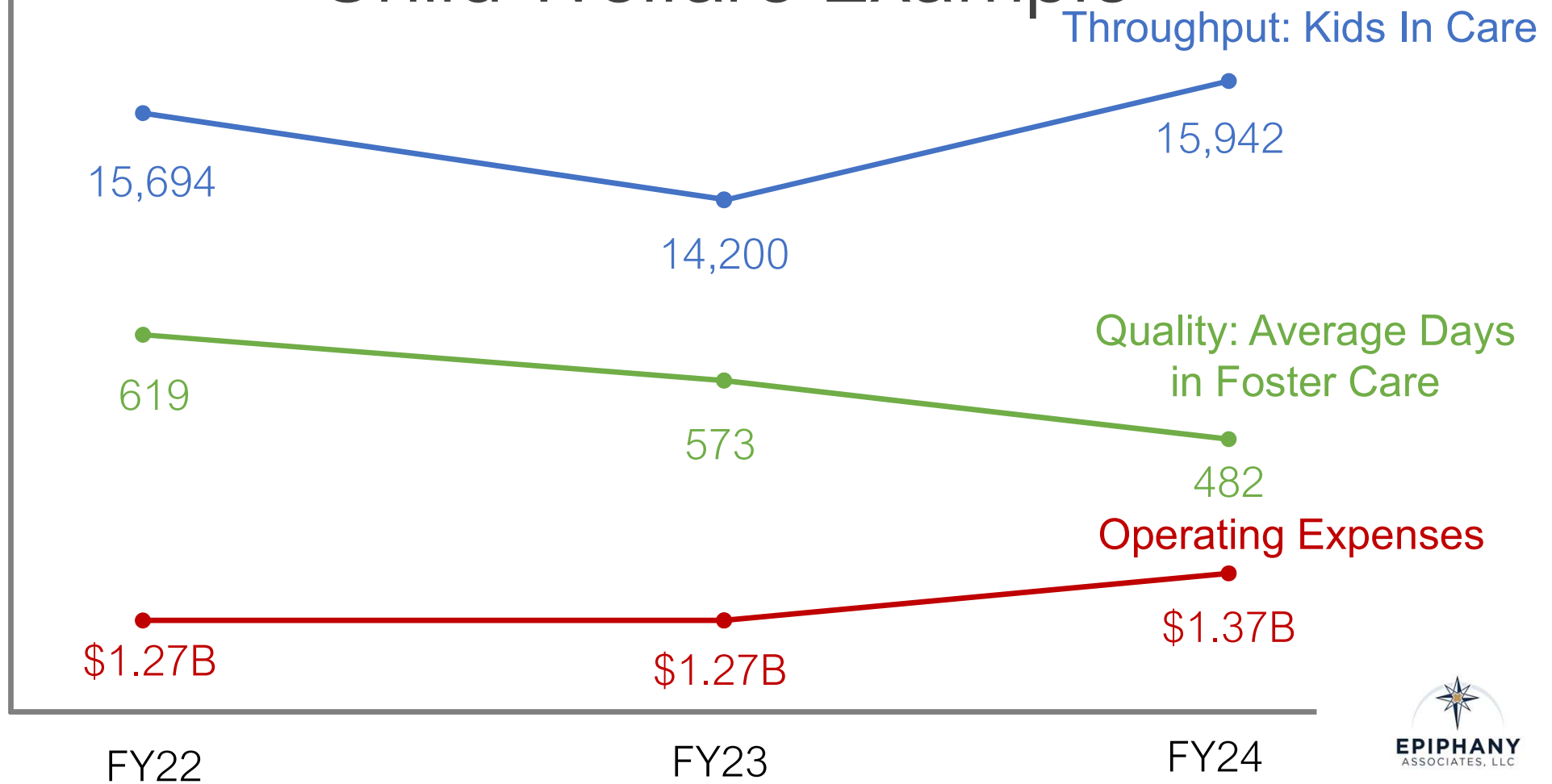
What we often see



Occupational Licensure Example



Child Welfare Example





The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes. - Marcel Proust

System Definition

A collection of organizational parts (work units, functions, resources, processes, policies, etc.) that must work together to achieve a common goal.

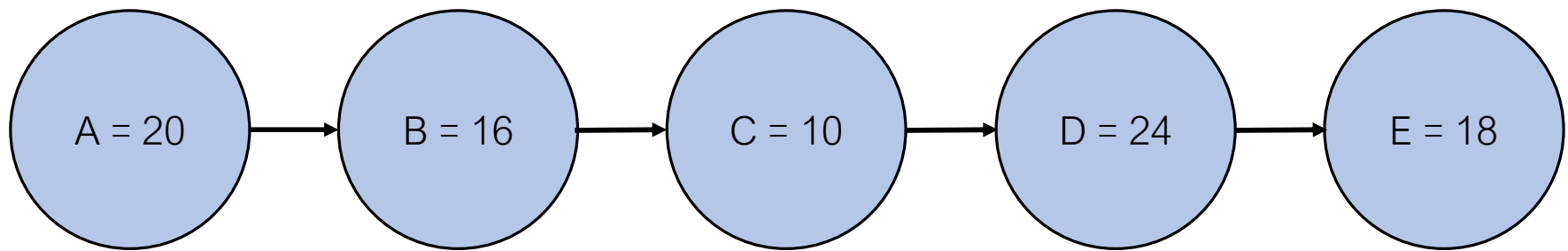
Systems Thinking

The performance of a system depends on how well its parts interact and work together, not on how well they perform separately. The parts cannot achieve the system's goal(s) by themselves.

Two Types of Systems

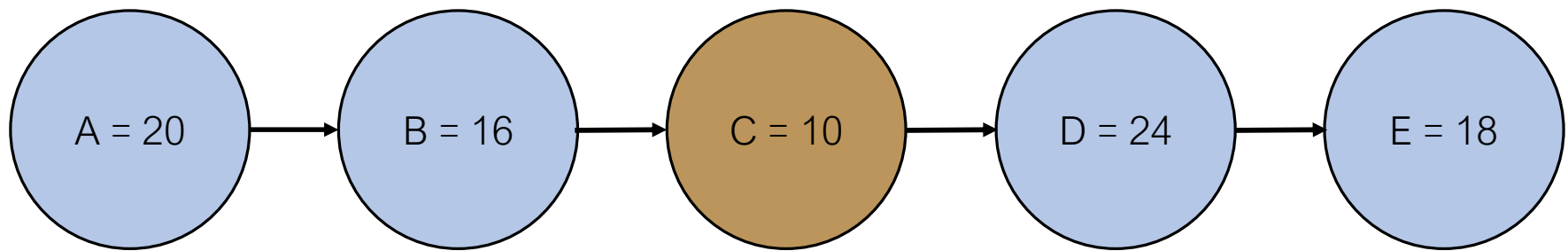
Dynamic/Complex

Transactional



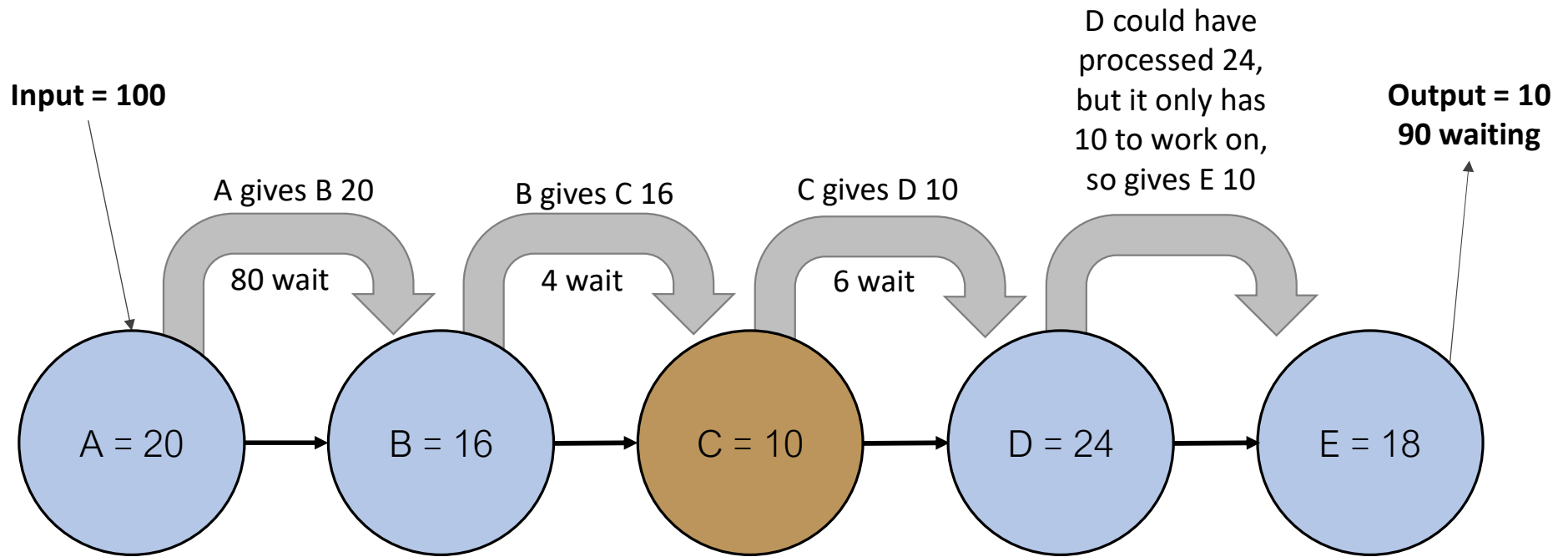
How many units can this system produce?

What function is constraining the throughput of the entire system?



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What is the Signal?

- Who needs What Outcome by when?
- Are they progressing on-time?
- If not, what's in the way?

Key Questions for Social Service Programs

- What are the most frequently needed services across all service plans?
- What is the average wait time for those services, by geographical area?
- What are the top reasons for delays in case progression? Can you quantify how many days of delay for each reason?

Case Plan Comparison

Typical Case Plan

Typical Case Plan Example

Goal 1: Attend substance use assessment

Goal 2: Participate in outpatient treatment sessions

Goal 3: Apply for housing voucher

Goal 4: Participate in weekly supervised visitation

Goal 5: Attend parenting education course

Plan review frequency: every 30 days.

- Prescribes tasks/activities instead of the outcomes needing to be satisfied for case closure.
- No or very little timelines (no time signals).
- No indicators of case progression issues or the reasons for delays.

Case Plan Comparison

Milestone Plan Example

Target Reunification Date: 6 months from plan approval

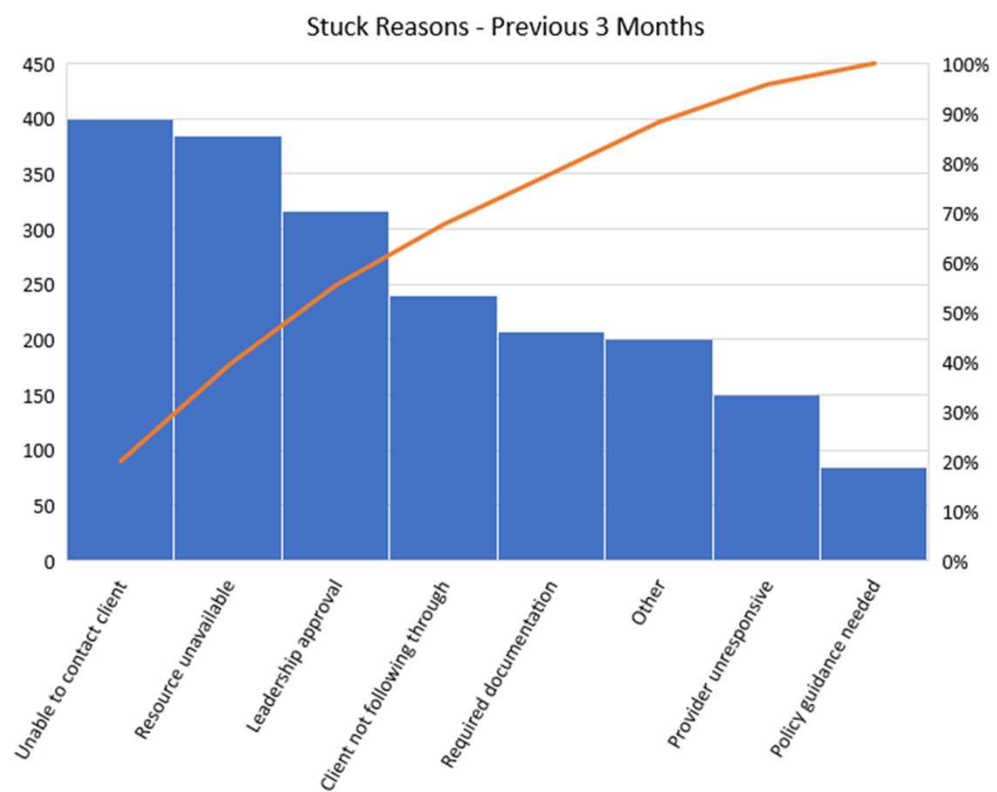
Review frequency: As milestones approach their target dates, minimum every 30 days.

Plan progression status: **stuck** (supervisor/management intervention needed)

Milestone	Timeline	Status
Milestone 1: Complete substance use assessment	Week 1 to Week 2	Complete
Milestone 2: Successfully participate in outpatient treatment sessions	Week 2 – Ongoing	In-progress
Milestone 3: Secure and maintain safe housing	Week 4 – Month 3	Complete
Milestone 4: Successfully participate in supervised visitations.	Week 6 – Ongoing	In-progress
Milestone 5: Complete parenting education course.	Month 2 to Month 6	Stuck. Reason: No providers available.
Milestone 6: Reunification staffing & decision.	Month 6	Not started

Milestone Delays

Insights from case plan delays become the signal for the system on which problem is the most important to solve.



Signals in Action

Behavioral Health Hospital Example

Purpose: Assist individuals with restoring mental competency.

Challenge: The facility's waitlist reached a high of 115 days, causing significant delays in treatment for individuals in need.

What were they doing to try and solve the problem? Expanding bed capacity and staffing resources, resulting in significant budget overages.

What changes did they make instead?

- Changed their mindset from maximizing utilization to maximizing throughput (successful discharges).
- Used time signals to determine patient progress based on a clinically determined timelines. This signal helped resources prioritize their work to ensure each patient received the services and interventions they needed for a timely, successful discharge.

Results

- Discharges from the facility increased by 22%,
- Average patient length of stay decreased by 20%,
- Admission wait time reduced by 51%
- The facilities state General Fund costs reduced by 15%.

Occupational Licensing Example

Purpose: Issuing licenses to people so they can practice many specific professions across the state.

Challenge: A backlog of 440 applications and an average processing time of over 100 days.

What were they doing to try and solve the problem? Hire more staff

What changes did they make instead?

- Reviewing applications for complete information prior to review by an expert.
- Off loaded administrative duties from experts (ex: answering phones/email, reviewing incoming correspondence, etc.), allowing them to spend more time issuing determinations.

Results

In just 3 months:

- Application backlog reduced from 440 to 133 applications,
- Processing time reduced from 100 days to 21 days, and
- Nearly 100% of credentials are being issued within 30 days of application.

Child Welfare Example

Purpose: Protect children from abuse and neglect while promoting family stability

Challenge: Key program outcome measures indicated that improvement was needed.

- Repeat maltreatment rate of youth children reached a high of 7.4%.
- Average age of a case for a child placed out-of-home reached a high of 647 days.

What were they doing to try and solve the problem? Onboarding additional evidenced based assessment tools, privatization, new alternative response resources and solutions.

What changes did they make instead?

- Revise policies and assessments to focus on core abuse and neglect risks.
- Reduced distractions and inefficiencies for front-line workers.
- Focused case plans on clinically determined needs aligned to risks/defined conditions for return.
- Improved oversight and collaboration on case progression through structured huddles and better case progression signals.

Results

- Repeat maltreatment decreased 8%.
- Average time in out-of-home care reduced by 32 days (5%)
- State General Fund spending reduced by \$15.7M (and increasing).

Eligibility Example

Purpose: Determine eligibility for Medicaid and Economic Assistance benefits.

Challenge: Initial application and renewal processing timeliness was too slow.

- Only 72% of initial applications were processed within the goal of 30 days.
- Only 38% of renewal determinations were processed prior to relevant service expiration date.

What were they doing to try and solve the problem?

- Enhancing application technology and experience
- Operating a task-based workload methodology and performance measurement approach
- Pulling in experts to answer calls to ensure wait times remained low

What changes did they make instead?

- Switch to a decision-based workload instead of task-based.
- Ensure high performing staff spend their time making decisions instead of being pulled into answering calls.
- Enhancing technology to enable process flow (ex: checking for complete information prior to assignment to experts).
- Specializing staff workloads around the most common types of applications.

Results

- Staff throughput increased from 2-3 decisions per day to 5-6.
- The percentage of initial apps processed within 30 days improved from 72 to 80%.
- The percentage of renewals determinations processed prior to relevant service expiration date improved from 38% to 69%.

MAGI Medicaid / SNAP

Required verifications:

- Identity (e.g., state ID, SSN)
- U.S. citizenship or immigration status
- Residency (e.g., utility bill, lease agreement)
- **Income (e.g., pay stubs, tax returns, employer letter) – * Missing 39% of the time**
- Household composition
- Pregnancy (if applicable)
- Health insurance status (if applicable)
- Tax filing status (for MAGI rules)

** Income is most frequently missing – becomes the signal to fix in the system*

Conclusion

We need a new lens. When we learn to understand systems and see the right signals, that brings clarity. That brings simplicity. That transforms your ability to lead, and that brings breakthrough results.

Ways We Can Help

1. System Performance Assessment

With a Bottom-Line Performance Report: see what you're producing, spending, and getting in return. Includes historical trends, a quantified estimate of waste in your system, and a review of KPIs to see if they are helping or hurting.

2. Organizational Focus Assessment

A review of IT projects, initiatives, and leadership priorities to show where time and energy are going—and whether it lines up with what matters most.

3. Procurement Value Review

A focused review of where dollars are going—and whether your investments are solving the right problems or just buying more activity.

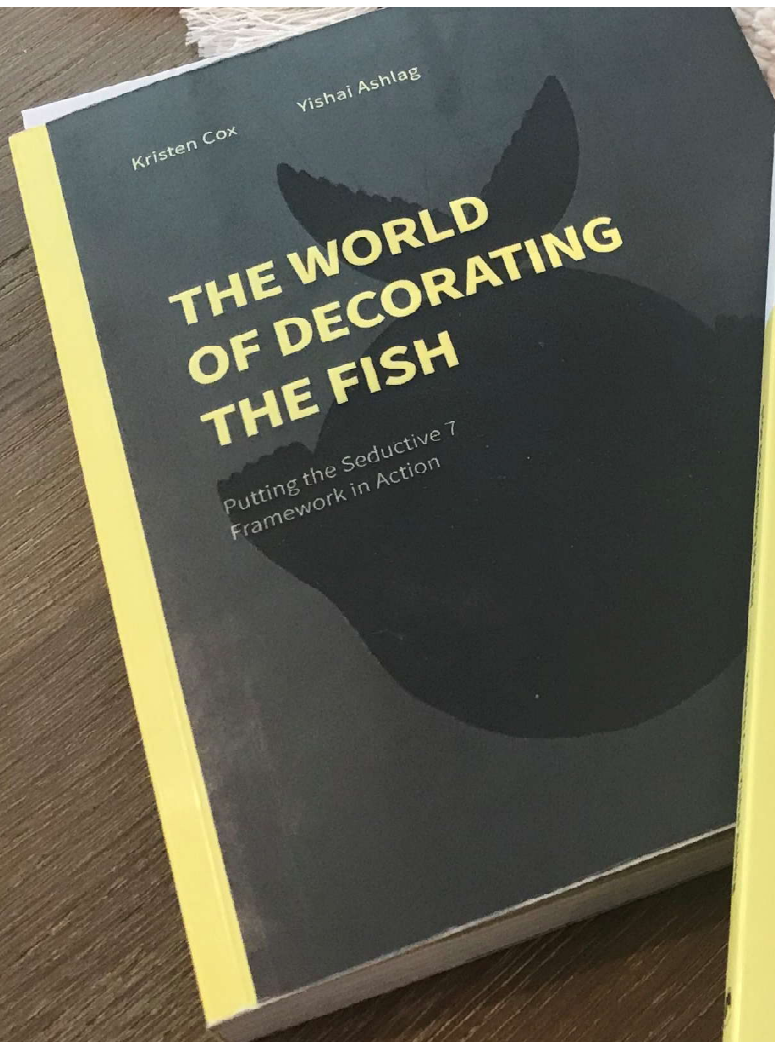
4. System Improvement Engagement

Through a short discovery process, we'll assess your challenges and recommend the support that fits your needs to achieve significant and agree upon results—whether it's targeted help or full system improvement efforts.





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