

Predictive analytics could improve CYFD outcomes

It won't fix all the agency's problems, but algorithms consistently outperform humans

BY SHANA JUDGE

DATA SCIENTIST, ALBUQUERQUE RESIDENT

The reports appear with distressing regularity. Each describes yet another child maltreated in New Mexico, even while being monitored by the state's Children, Youth and Families Department. These reports barely outnumber those critical of CYFD itself, of its procurement practices, its outdated computer systems and its lack of transparency.

And don't forget the reports of problems within the state's treatment foster care agencies. New Mexico contracts with these agencies to coordinate therapeutic care for high-needs children in state custody. But like CYFD itself, several of these agencies have been plagued by administrative problems. Some have lost their operational licenses and others face lawsuits over their handling of cases.

Of course, there are instances when our state's child welfare system works. I've met foster parents in New Mexico who are exemplars, who try to work within the system to give at-risk kids the care they need. Nevertheless, even these experienced foster care providers tell of having to repeatedly navigate nonsensical bureaucratic hurdles to maintain a home for the children under their care. Yet the same hurdles have failed to prevent the abuse and deaths of other children.

The CYFD system has seemingly not found the right balance among competing goals of reuniting families, protecting vulnerable children, and reducing the bureaucratic burden on successful foster care families. Unfortunately, finding the right balance may be impractical because CYFD employees are charged with an unenviable and difficult task: predicting the future. What would be best for a child, particularly in light of continually changing circumstances?

To better predict the future and rebalance the system, there is an option that could help: Remove the human element from some CYFD decisionmaking processes.

statistical techniques that use large quantities of data to predict the likelihood of future outcomes, including child welfare outcomes such as repeat maltreatment or foster care re-entry.

Predictive analytics can supplement good casework and administration by providing data-driven insights into the relative risks children face amid complex and varying conditions. It's not a panacea for all of CYFD's challenges. But it could serve as an important tool to support agency policies and processes and the employees themselves.

Some advocates for children or families might be concerned about permitting statistical algorithms to play a role in life-changing decisions. However, a growing body of research is demonstrating that in forecasting outcomes, including the risk assessment that's integral to child welfare decisions, these algorithms consistently outperform humans. Predictive analytics can overcome many of the biases and flaws inherent in human decision-making.

CYFD already uses some risk assessment tools in its work. But it needs a better system for developing predictions specific to child welfare outcomes. CYFD would not be starting from scratch. The federal government has completed preliminary work in this area and offers guidance to states on how to implement predictive analytics in child welfare systems.

Currently, CYFD appears to be trying versions of past attempts at making improvements — new leadership, more evaluations, different contracts for services. But like the rest of us, the humans involved in our state's child welfare system are all-too fallible. Perhaps it's time to try a new approach: Let an algorithm guide the humans.

Shana Judge, JD, PhD, is a social science researcher and data scientist. She is the founder and Executive Director of Duddon Evidence to Policy Research, an Albuquerque-based law and policy consulting business — duddonresearch.org.

Instead, where appropriate and feasible, CYFD should consider using methodologies called “predictive analytics” to improve child welfare outcomes. Predictive analytics is a broad term for advanced

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Utilities join Navajo Nation to bring thousands electricity for the first time

BY JONATHAN NEZ

In the year 2021, it is difficult for me to comprehend that over 1,000 families in the United States live without electricity and many of whom are Navajo people that reside on the Navajo Nation. With support of Navajo Nation leaders, the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority (NTUA) partnered with the American Public Power Association (APPA) and member utilities to connect homes to the electric grid. Light Up Navajo was created as a mutual aid project that extends electricity to many homes in our communities. It is life-changing for families who have waited for electricity their entire lives.

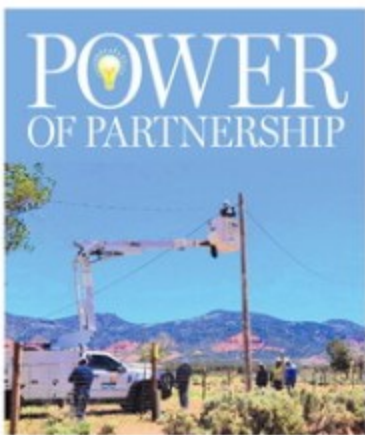


Jonathan Nez
As president of the Navajo Nation, he has received these basic amenities for the very first time. This means that they can finally enjoy modern conveniences of lighting, refrigerators and other household items without having to use generators.

Local line crews from NTUA worked alongside crews from 14 utility companies from across the United States from as far away as Maine and as close as our neighboring New Mexico energy company PNM. Crews worked long hours and some as many as 12 days straight to construct miles of distribution lines to connect our Navajo homes.

The Navajo Nation spreads over the largest land area of any Indigenous population in the United States. Our teachers do the job on the land, making it a challenge to provide electricity to families who live in remote areas of the 16,000 square miles of Navajo land.

As a young person, growing up without electricity and running water taught me to provide for my family by hauling water, chopping



Light Up Navajo has crews from the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority working with local utilities including PNM. They have provided electricity to around 7,000 homes on the Navajo Nation.

wood and understanding how fortunate we were to be able to use kerosene for our table lamps from time to time. As a leader, I am very thankful for what Light Up Navajo delivered to our elders and youth.

Electricity can also provide for other critical services including running water, heat and access to high-speed internet. These are services most people take for granted. Recently, a PNM crew constructed distribution lines to electrify the home of Julie and David Jones near Burnham, N.M. Julie called the crew members "Shobon," (my aunt) as she cried tears of joy when the work was completed and she could turn on her lights with a simple flip of a switch for the first time. Crews were treated to a meal of time and tylenoid by Julie and her family. What so many people take for granted, many on the Navajo Nation

are grateful for — to be able to make a pot of coffee without building a fire and refrigerate their food.

The average cost to connect one family to the power grid is \$4,000, but it is at no cost for recipients of this program thanks to companies donating time and materials along with the Crew Archiving. Since the Light Up Navajo program started in 2019, nearly 7,000 family homes have been connected to the power grid.

I congratulate the families and thank all the volunteers. Working together is how we get things done. We will continue to build upon this success and the hard work of many who are working to make our Nation stronger. I am proud of our work and look forward to the continued partnership with Light Up Navajo TV.

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DATA SCIENTIST, ALBUQUERQUE MENTOR

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Of course, there are instances when our state's child welfare system works. For me, foster parents in New Mexico who are caregivers, who try to work within the system to give at-risk kids the care they need. Nevertheless, even these experienced foster care providers get of having to repeatedly navigate nonsensical bureaucratic hurdles to maintain a home for the children under their care. For the same hurdles have failed to prevent the abuse and deaths of other children.

The CYFD system has seemingly not found the right balance among competing goals of reuniting families, protecting vulnerable children, and reducing the bureaucratic burden on successful foster care families. Unfortunately, finding the right balance may be impossible because CYFD employees are charged with an untenable and difficult task: predicting the future. What would be best for a child, particularly in light of constantly changing circumstances?

To better predict the future and stabilize the system, there is an option that could help: Remove the human element from some CYFD decision-making processes. Instead, where appropriate and feasible, CYFD should consider using methodologies called "predictive analytics" to improve child welfare outcomes. Predictive analytics is a broad term for advanced statistical techniques that use large quantities of data to predict the likelihood of future outcomes, including child welfare outcomes such as repeat maltreatment or foster care re-entry.

Predictive analysis can supplement good casework and administration by providing data-driven insights into the relative risks children face under complex and varying conditions. It's not a panacea for all of CYFD's challenges, but it could serve as an important tool to support agency policies and processes and the employees themselves.

Some advocates for children or families might be concerned about permitting statistical algorithms to play a role in life-changing decisions. However, a growing body of research is demonstrating that it is forecasting outcomes, including the risk assessment that's integral to child welfare decisions, these algorithms consistently outperform humans. Predictive analysis can overcome many of the biases and flaws inherent in human decision-making. CYFD already uses some risk assessment tools in its work, but it needs a better system for developing predictions specific to child welfare outcomes. CYFD would not be starting from scratch. The federal government has completed preliminary work in this area and offers guidelines to states on how to implement predictive analytics in child welfare systems.

Currently, CYFD appears to be trying variations of past attempts at making improvements — new leadership, more evaluations, different contracts for services. But like the rest of us, the humans involved in our state's child welfare system are all too fallible. Perhaps it's time to try a new approach. Let an algorithm guide the humans.

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NM seniors need more social, community connections

Support programs help folks stay independent and in their homes

BY DR. RONALD L. SANDALI
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We are all wired for emotional connection, and that doesn't stop when we retire. In my experience as a geriatrician, seniors who have family or a strong support network by their side are more likely to remain living in their homes longer, get the care they need and have better health outcomes. Unfortunately, seniors who are more isolated with less of a social support system experience more challenges and often don't receive important care.

Through my practice, I learned the path to better health for our seniors isn't always through the doctor's office. When seniors are a part of an active community, their health outcomes improve. But in many instances, these communities have been less active due to COVID-19. The lack of community support throughout the pandemic has exacerbated the impact of social isolation and mental health challenges, which affect quality of life and a sense of purpose and connection in our seniors' age.

The United Health Foundation's 20th annual "America's Health Rankings Senior Report," which highlights a 10-year study of improvements, challenges and disparities in health and well-being across all 50



states, reflects this reality for older adults in America who felt the impact of the pandemic in many ways. Unfortunately, the Senior Report revealed a decade of worsening mental and behavioral health challenges among older adults. In the last 10 years, nationally, we saw a 19% increase in the suicide rate, a 29% increase in the prevalence of depression and an 18% increase in the prevalence of anxiety among adults 65 and older. And drug deaths increased 147% among seniors age 65+.

The behavioral health measures in New Mexico were most concerning in this year's report, with the state ranking 47th for suicide among seniors 65 and older and 50th in frequent mental distress.

The correlation between community connection, community and independent living for seniors is so important to achieving healthy outcomes and a higher quality of life, including those behavioral health measures, that when someone doesn't have a relational or chosen family it is up to society to fill that need.

New Mexico ranked 41st overall (healthiest state) in this year's Senior Report, which is very low. The disturbing combination of frequent mental distress and high suicide rates across the state represents a large gap in social support. A study published in Health Services Research in 2013 found that increases in home- and community-based services for older adults, such as home-delivered meals, congregating meals or community centers, were associated with a decrease in the rate of low-care residents in nursing homes. And data from the most Older Americans Resource Survey to Congress also suggested community support services are effective — 69% of congregating meal clients and 82% of home-delivered meal clients reported that these services helped them continue to live independently at home.

Increasing the number of licensed home health care workers per capita is another area of opportunity. The NAHP Foundation offers a program, Connected, that helps seniors who are experiencing isolation or loneliness. This program offers solutions in collaboration with the Gerontological Society of America, Give an Hour, The Aging and Disability Health Group, Connected.Affect uses research to create a deeper understanding of loneliness and isolation, draw needed attention to the issue, and catalyze action to end social isolation among older adults.

It's clear programs that support behavioral health and social services for older adults can help them maintain independence and, hopefully, improve behavioral health measures. We need to help the seniors in our lives reconnect with their communities and activities they have enjoyed in the past but have not yet returned to on a regular basis. And we need to better programs that offer evidence-based community support, equipped with this data. These two goals work together to address emerging health disparities among older Americans as they strive to remain independent in their homes, and connected to their communities.

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