



# ENCOURAGING VERSUS CHALLENGING SUPERVISION: EXPERIENCES OF NEWLY-HIRED CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

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## CONTACT US

Questions or comments regarding findings can be directed to the FSPSF Principal Investigator, Dr. Dina Wilke, at [dwilke@fsu.edu](mailto:dwilke@fsu.edu) or (850) 644-9597.

## BACKGROUND

Due to the intense demands of their jobs, 20 to 50% of frontline workers leave child welfare within the first few years of hire.<sup>1,2</sup> One factor contributing to workers' job satisfaction and retention is quality supervision.<sup>3,4</sup> However, workers' typical experiences with supervision are inconsistent, primarily task-oriented<sup>5</sup> and without emotional support.<sup>6</sup> This study used interviews with newly-hired child welfare workers to consider: What are the supervision expectations and experiences of child welfare workers, specifically within the early stages of their careers?

## METHODOLOGY

From workers participating in the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF), researchers randomly invited child protective investigators (CPIs) and case managers (CMs) from throughout the state to participate in interviews to discuss their experiences transitioning from training to independent caseloads. At the time of the interview, workers had been employed in their role for approximately six months. The FSPSF team completed interviews with 38 participants who were: 1) CPIs or CMs; 2) had completed pre-service training; and 3) maintained independent caseloads. Participants were asked about their classroom and field training, supervision, support, and their perception of preparedness for independent work and caseloads. Transcripts were analyzed for common themes.

## FINDINGS

Most newly-hired workers considered their current supervisor as "hands on" and encouraging or, conversely, as "empty" and challenging. Approximately 50% of workers described encouraging experiences ( $n = 20$ ) and 33% described challenging experiences ( $n = 12$ ). The remaining workers ( $n = 6$ ) described mixed experiences typically due to supervisor turnover. Workers voiced similar expectations for supervision and recognized a range of supervisor quality. They felt "lucky" or "shafted" depending on their situations. Workers classified their experiences in four domains: 1) availability and approachability; 2) consistency of provided information; 3) micromanagement; and 4) support. Regardless of their actual experiences, workers had similar expectations of their supervisors in each domain. The sections below outline newly-hired workers' expectations and experiences regarding each domain and suggest ways to promote encouraging supervision.

### AVAILABILITY & APPROACHABILITY

Although newly-hired workers recognized the nature of child welfare work meant fast-paced, time-contingent, and unpredictable work, they expected that supervisors would be available and willing to assist them as needed. Rather than requiring a certain frequency of supervision, workers voiced the need for ad-hoc availability. Workers with encouraging experiences felt supervisors were available "24/7," while workers with challenging ones felt they were "winging it" on their own.

## CONSISTENCY OF PROVIDED INFORMATION

Newly-hired workers anticipated having many questions and expected their supervisors to provide and teach clear, accurate information. Encouraging supervisors met these expectations while challenging supervisors gave contradictory instructions, assigned tasks without justification, and gave the same explanations over and over despite workers expressing confusion.

## MICROMANAGEMENT

Given their ultimate job responsibility of child safety, newly-hired workers almost universally expected “micromanagement.” For them, this meant frequent case consultations, case reviews, and detailed feedback. Workers with encouraging experiences felt that micromanagement provided opportunities for them both to learn and ensure child safety while workers with challenging experiences desired more micromanagement and felt vulnerable in their case decisions.

## SUPPORT

Given the demanding nature of the job, in order to ensure child safety new workers expected their supervisors to provide a supportive, team atmosphere. Workers with encouraging experiences commonly described “a great union” and supervisors who would “go to bat” for them while workers with challenging experiences and little support often felt incompetent and that they were “letting down” their supervisors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Taken together, these findings yield four main implications:

- Supervisors can benefit from understanding new workers’ high reliance on guidance over the first six months on the job. Although supervisors cannot be available at all times, akin to office hours, supervisors can welcome newly-hired workers to check in during specified hours each day on an as needed basis.
- Developing appropriate competencies for supervisors to meet newly-hired workers’ common expectations for available, knowledgeable, case-oriented, and supportive supervisors can guide training efforts. Supervision requires a distinct skillset from frontline child welfare work and providing supervisors with essential knowledge and skills can promote successful transition experiences among newly-hired workers.
- A checklist to guide decision-making for workers to reference during the transition from pre-service training to independent casework can help workers increase their sense of competence and confidence on the job. The checklist can provide workers with step-by-step instructions under various conditions as they handle a variety of cases for the first time.
- Reduced caseloads for both newly-hired workers and their supervisors during the first six months on the job can promote a supportive environment that effectively socializes newly-hired employees. Supervisors can spend time to address workers’ job concerns and apprehensions and workers can spend time to learn and complete their jobs tasks.

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<sup>1</sup> Chenot, D., Benton, A. D., & Kim, H. (2009). The influence of supervisor support, peer support, and organizational culture among early career social workers in child welfare services. *Child Welfare, 88*, 129-147.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, B. D. (2005). Job retention in child welfare: Effects of perceived organizational support, supervisor support, and intrinsic job value. *Children and Youth Services Review, 27*, 153-169.

<sup>3</sup> Carpenter, J., Webb, C.M., & Bostock, L. (2013). The surprisingly weak evidence base for supervision: Findings from a systematic review of research in child welfare practice (2000–2012). *Children and Youth Services Review, 35*, 1843–1853.

<sup>4</sup> Lietz, C., & Rounds, T. (2009). Strengths-based supervision: A child welfare supervision training project. *The Clinical Supervisor, 28*, 124-140.

<sup>5</sup> Gibbs, J. (2001). Maintaining frontline workers in child protection: A case for refocusing supervision. *Child Abuse Review, 10*, 323-335.

<sup>6</sup> Hair, H. J. (2013). The purpose and duration of supervision, and the training and discipline of supervisors: What social workers say they need to provide effective services. *The British Journal of Social Work, 43*, 1562-1588.

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