



FIELD TRAINING EXPERIENCES OF NEWLY-HIRED CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

JUNE 2018

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BACKGROUND

Annual child welfare turnover rates among frontline workers range from 20% to 40%, and rates are particularly high among newly-hired workers.^{1,2} Training is a critical component in attracting and maintaining workers in child welfare positions, and a lack of effective training contributes to turnover.³ This brief uses interview data with newly-hired child welfare workers in Florida to examine their agency-based field training experiences. Field days are a key component of training for new hires to apply the pre-service curriculum in a real-world environment. During agency-based field days trainees shadow certified workers, who serve as mentors, to learn core job responsibilities. This study seeks to identify what facilitates meaningful field day experiences in preparation for frontline positions from the perspectives of recently-hired workers.

METHODOLOGY

Through a random selection process to include child protective investigators (CPIs) and case managers (CMs) from throughout the state, researchers invited Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF) respondents to participate in interviews to discuss their experiences in training and in transitioning to independent caseloads. At the time of the interview, workers had been employed in their role for approximately six months, which included about 2-3 months of training, and 3-4 months of casework. 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 level of job preparedness. Transcripts were analyzed for common themes.

FINDINGS

All workers expressed that field days played an important role in their job preparation. However, workers' experiences with field days varied. Almost 50% ($n = 17$) had positive, meaningful experiences and 40% ($n = 15$) did not. Those with positive experiences generally felt that their field days exposed them to critical, realistic job content while those with negative experiences felt frustrated that they received incomplete training and wasted time in agency offices without guidance. The remaining participants felt mixed about their experiences ($n = 6$) such that although some field days were helpful, they desired more exposure to job tasks and procedures. Data analysis identified four themes related to the conditions facilitating meaningful field day experiences and preparation for their positions:

AVAILABILITY & APPROACHABILITY

Participants consistently viewed field days as an excellent opportunity to integrate pre-service classroom learning into the practice setting. Observing mentors and applying content from the classroom-based training enabled newly-hired workers to improve the skills needed for their positions. Likewise, participants emphasized that field experiences provided exposure to the reality of the child welfare context, which facilitated their development of realistic job expectations. Regardless of the quality of the experience, participants expressed that field days could offer a supervised forum in which they could "see what you learned and actually put it into play."

STRUCTURE OF FIELD DAYS

Newly-hired workers expressed that having structure within field days contributed to the quality of learning experiences. Most participants with meaningful experiences had field days with a defined purpose, assigned tasks, and an experienced mentor assigned to them. Tasks included shadowing the mentor while conducting a home visit, attending court, or completing administrative tasks necessary for documentation. Alternatively, workers whose field days lacked structure expressed frustration and regret that they “just sat” during their time at the agency due to unassigned mentors and fluctuating schedules. In these circumstances, agencies were unprepared to provide appropriate experiences for new workers.

FUNCTIONING IN DISRUPTED ENVIRONMENTS

The work setting shaped participants’ field days, and at times disrupted meaningful experiences. For some workers, high caseloads, the fast-paced nature of the work, the priority of timely investigations, and timelines for case closures translated to mentors not being available to newly-hired workers. Typically, workers did not blame mentors who were unable to attend to them due to their own job responsibilities. In fact, in spite of frustration in having limited opportunities to observe or participate in critical job tasks, study participants valued gaining a realistic view of job demands.

CONNECTION TO MENTORS

The quality and level of engagement between the newly-hired worker and mentor played a key role in the quality of the field training experiences. Several study participants with meaningful experiences noted the patience of their mentors; they connected with their mentor. Alternatively, workers without meaningful experiences described lacking approachable mentors. In addition to the structure and content of field days, the quality of interaction between the worker and the mentor contributed to participants’ ability to ask the questions necessary to learn job tasks and feel welcomed in the field.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Field days were most successful when agencies were prepared for trainees and had a plan for their learning experiences that mirrored training content. Taken together, these findings yield the following recommendations for agencies:

- Identify agency-based liaisons as a single point of contact for training personnel in order to coordinate the field day experience of trainees. This could include planning daily field day activities, assigning trainees to effective mentors, coaching mentors on the needs of trainees, and providing feedback to training personnel on the continued learning needs of trainees based on field day performance.
- Develop checklists for mentors and trainees to use to optimize learning experiences.
- Identify approachable and supportive agency professionals to serve as mentors and provide training on best practices for teaching and coaching new employees.
- Have alternative activities prepared for trainees whose training day activities become disrupted due to unforeseen circumstances (e.g., alternative mentors, training about agency-based policies and practices).

¹ Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) (2016). *Child protective investigator and child protective investigator supervisor educational qualifications, turnover, and working conditions status report*. Tallahassee, FL: Authors.

² General Accounting Office (GAO) (2003). *Child welfare: HHS could play a greater role in helping child welfare agencies recruit and retain staff*. Washington, DC: Author.

³ Mandell, D., Stalker, C., de Zeeuw Wright, M., Frensch, K., & Harvey, C. (2013). Sinking, swimming and sailing: experiences of job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion in child welfare employees. *Child & Family Social Work, 18*, 383-393.

Funding Provided By:

