

THE FLORIDA STUDY OF
PROFESSIONALS FOR

SAFE FAMILIES



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TRANSITIONING FROM TRAINING TO INDEPENDENT WORK: IMPACTS ON EARLY TURNOVER

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BACKGROUND

Effective training and preparation are important as new child welfare workers begin their work with families at risk of maltreatment. Child welfare workers must understand the complex social problems affecting vulnerable children and families; employ interviewing, assessment, and case management skills; and deliver individualized, skilled services.^{1,2} Pre-service training begins the process of developing these skills. Organizations shape the knowledge and expectations of new workers through training, which often includes didactic classroom experiences and opportunities for new hires to shadow and learn from more experienced workers. Content delivery strategies, skill development opportunities, and the amount and structure of days in the field all influence preparedness for child welfare work. Moreover, investment in training can decrease turnover,^{3,4} a significant national priority to impact the effective delivery of services to children and their families. Thus, practices that increase worker confidence and competence to provide services are important areas to address.

TRAINING CONTEXT

In Florida, multiple groups of workers typically come together in a centralized location for the classroom-based portion of pre-service training. As an example, training for child protective investigators is generally organized around a judicial circuit, which may bring together workers assigned to as many as five or six different county service centers. Dependency case managers have a similar structure of training in a centralized location and casework in different local agencies. This semi-centralized training model may introduce challenges when workers begin to apply classroom learning within individual agency environments.

METHODOLOGY

The Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families is a longitudinal study of newly-hired child welfare workers throughout Florida. Participants were eligible if they were 1) involved in pre-service training; and 2) working toward Florida certification as a Child Protective Investigator or Dependency Case Manager. Baseline data were collected between September 2015 and December 2016, with 86% of newly hired workers across Florida completing initial surveys ($N = 1,501$). Participants completed a second survey six months following baseline data collection, and 87% of the original sample responded ($n = 1,306$). The six-month time period represents approximately two to three months of pre-service training and three to four months of casework with children and families.

Data for this analysis focus on the transition experiences of new workers leaving pre-service training and beginning casework in their employing agency or service center, hereinafter referred to as agency. Study participants were asked about the availability of specialized mentoring as they began caseload responsibilities, the number of cases received in the first week providing services, and perceptions of the consistency between agency practice and education received during classroom-based training. This information was used to predict departure (turnover) within the first six months of employment, a group of workers referred to as “early leavers.” Chi-square and *t*-test analyses were used to detect differences between early leavers and those who remain. Logistic regression was used to predict the likelihood of early departure.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDINGS

Overall, 18% of study participants left their agencies within the first six months ($n = 235$). Early leavers were older and had more prior work experience in any field than those who remained in their child welfare jobs. There were no significant differences in coping strategies, satisfaction with pay or benefits, support received from supervisors and co-workers, or previous child welfare work experience between the two groups. However, early leavers and those who remained significantly differed on all three measures of transition experiences. Fewer early leavers received specialized mentoring when beginning their caseload responsibilities than those who remained (56% and 70%, respectively). Caseload sizes for all workers in their first week of casework ranged from 0 cases assigned to 27 cases, and on average, early leavers reported a higher initial caseload than those who remained (3.2 cases vs. 2.5 cases, respectively). Early leavers also reported more discrepancies between information provided in training and actual agency practice; 54% of early leavers indicated that agency practice was rarely or not at all consistent with training information compared to 30% of those who remained.

Workers' transition experiences also predicted the likelihood of early departure. After controlling for a worker's personal background, each additional case assigned the first week of casework increased the likelihood of departure by the six-month period by 8%. This suggests that a worker assigned 10 cases in the first week following training was 80% more likely to leave than a worker assigned no cases. Further, compared to workers who indicated training was completely consistent with agency practice, those who said it was rarely consistent were 90% more likely to leave, while those who said agency practice was not at all consistent with training were 400% more likely to leave within the first six months of employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The transition period from a centralized classroom training experience to agency-based casework is often a stressful one. Policies and practices that support workers during this transition time are an important strategy to reduce early turnover. Specific recommendations include:

- Incorporate opportunities for agency-specific policy and procedure training during the standardized pre-service training calendar;
- Identify specific agency representatives to serve as liaisons with pre-service training staff to inform content development and delivery, and oversee agency-based field days when trainees are shadowing current workers;
- Identify specific agency representatives to serve as educators, mentors, or advocates for new hires transitioning to casework;
- Carefully monitor the early workload of new hires and develop processes to insure agency guidelines regarding case assignment are being followed.

¹ Franke, T., Bagdasaryan, S., & Furman, W. (2009). A multivariate analysis of training, education, and readiness for public child welfare practice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(12), 1330–1336.

² Nguyen, L. H. (2013). Using return on investment to evaluate child welfare training programs. *Social Work*, 58, 75-79.

³ Children's Defense Fund, & Children's Rights. (2006). *Components of an effective child welfare workforce to improve outcomes for children and families: What does the research tell us?* Retrieved from <http://www.childrensdefense.org/library/data/components-of-an-effective-child-welfare-workforce.pdf>

⁴ Collins, M. E., Amodeo, M., & Clay, C. (2007). Training as a factor in policy implementation: Lessons from a national evaluation of child welfare training. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29(12), 1487–1502.

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