

National Association of Social Workers
Texas Chapter



EMPLOYMENT IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

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EMPLOYMENT AND THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

This is a time in history when budgets are tightening and funding streams are highly competitive. Out of necessity, most are strategizing to streamline their organization and state agencies are feeling pressure to trim expenses and increase efficiency. However, we cannot overlook or dismiss the long-term ramifications for some of these cuts.

Agencies, such as our child welfare system, have for some time been struggling to give quality care to children. While the child welfare system consists of clients with complex needs, the ramifications for having an ineffective structure can be the difference between life and death. We have to invest in ensuring Texas's children become competent citizens who contribute back to our state.

ISSUES IN CHILD WELFARE

The child welfare workforce strives to advocate and care for a vulnerable population with overwhelming obstacles, while attempting to meet extensive legal mandates. Much of the burden of the life and death decisions fall on front-line workers and their supervisors, while at the same time meeting the high expectations of the public. Underfunding leads to high caseloads, inadequate training, low salaries, and high worker turnover, which delays the crucial timing of investigations and severely limits the frequency of worker visits to children. In a system where it is crucial to have experienced and educated caseworkers and supervisors, key federal safety and permanency outcomes are being disregarded due to these shortfalls.

Moreover, the attempt of privatization has not significantly improved quality of care or fiscal issues. Since 1996, the state appropriation for Medicaid fraud investigation has gone from less than a million dollars to more than 15 million dollars. Privatization of services has led to a shift of state dollars from providing services to investigating service providers. Unfortunately, these are not problems that are unique to Texas. The broken child welfare system is also national problem.

CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE

In comparison to jobs in other sectors that require comparable amounts of education and responsibility, child welfare positions demand excessively high workloads with low pay. Consequently, it is difficult to attract the most qualified employees, those with professional training and experience, and the results are turnover and vacancy rates in child welfare agencies that are often alarmingly high.

There has been a dramatic shift in the amount of education, professional training and

work experience of child welfare workers over the last 60 years. In the 1950's, close to 50 percent of child welfare staff were professional social workers. Whereas by the 1980's, only 28 percent of child welfare staff had either a BSW (15 percent) or a MSW (13 percent) degree. A survey of the child welfare workforce conducted in 1998 found fewer than 15 percent of child welfare agencies require caseworkers to hold either a bachelors or masters degrees in social work (Hansen, 2004).

However, the standards and policies for child welfare practice promulgated by the Child Welfare League of America, the American Humane Association, and the National Association of Social Workers recommend that child welfare administrators and supervisors have a master's degree in social work (MSW) and previous child welfare experience. Direct service workers have at least a bachelor in social work (BSW) degree. It is apparent that these standards contrast sharply with reality.

In the late 1980's, the failed commitment to employing well-trained welfare staff was coupled with rising foster care caseloads, rising rates of child abuse and neglect reports, an increasing number of class action law suits and media attention resulting from a number of child deaths. By the mid-1990's, 90 percent of states reported difficulty in recruiting and retaining caseworkers. The major challenges faced for recruiting and retaining front-line workers and supervisors are the risk of violence, low salaries, high case/workloads, administrative burdens, limited and inadequate supervision, and insufficient training (Hansen, 2004).

Worker Turnover

One common result of a high turnover rate, in Texas, are caseworkers being promoted to supervisory positions with only a few years experience. This inexperience fuels the feeling of being unprepared for the stressful and stringent requirements of their jobs, and increases the likelihood of poor management and insufficient support.

Turnover rates vary greatly among agencies. In a child welfare workforce survey conducted in 2000, 36 agencies reported annual turnover rates between zero and 20 percent, while 23 agencies reported rates between 50 and 600 percent (GAO, 2003).

Sadly, in Arizona, a wide gap has developed between the demand for child welfare services and the availability of qualified staff to meet this demand. Because of personnel shortages, the Department of Economic Security (DES) was, in some recent years, unable to respond to as many as 25 percent of child abuse and neglect reports deemed appropriate for investigation statewide (GAO, 2003).

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) reports that turnover rates of child welfare staff is estimated between 30 and 40 percent annually nationwide. The average tenure of workers is less than two years (GAO, 2003). Texas spends \$14,000 training each new CPS worker. An expert in the field of worker retention estimates the cost of training entry level employees are 30-50 percent of the annual salary, 150 percent of middle level

employees and up to 400 percent for specialized, high level employees (Blake, 2006).

While some worker turnover is inevitable, keeping trained and highly performing employees turnover near zero is possible and the standard in any successful business or organization. A tremendous amount of money is being depleted when it could be going to increase the salaries of those valuable employees we desperately need to keep. The Child Welfare League of America in consultation with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children, Youth, and Families and the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program indicate that, "Research that has analyzed exit survey data indicates that much turnover may be preventable as many departing staff give job conditions rather than personal or family circumstances as their reason for leaving (Cyphers, et al., 2005; Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Graef & Hill, 2000)." When caseworkers are unable to effectively serve the needs of children and families, the end result to the child is neglect, abuse, rape, illness, cognitive and emotional trauma, or death. "For hundreds of thousands of other children it means long-term, and in many cases permanent separation from loving families as they languish in inappropriate placements with scarce hope of returning to their families (Leiderman, 2003)."

Low Salaries and Inadequate Training

A major obstacle to recruitment and retention is the reality that child welfare agencies often are forced to compete for workers with institutions that pay higher wages and offer safer, more predictable work environments (Hansen, 2004).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics' national wages survey reports that elementary and middle school teachers earn, on average, about \$42,000 annually, while 'social workers' earn about \$33,000. There is almost a 32 percent difference in the average starting salary of and entry-level caseworker and the starting salary of most teachers.

According to the 2000 workforce study, the average annual salaries for public child protective services workers is \$33,000 and, for private agency staff, \$27,000. The average annual salary for child welfare supervisors in public agencies is \$42,000, and in private agencies it is \$40,000.

A 1990 study in Florida found that workers without educational preparation for child welfare work were most likely to leave within one year of being hired. A study based on the National Study of Public Child Welfare Job Requirements found that turnover is consistently higher in states that do not require any kind of degree for child welfare positions, and is consistently lower in states that require an MSW.

High Caseloads / Workloads

There is a direct correlation between worker turnover and high caseloads. In California, Illinois, Kentucky, and Texas, agencies reported that their inability to retain staff has contributed to their existing unmanageable caseloads. Those four states are not exceptions.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) recommends a caseload ratio of 12 to 15 children per caseworker (CWLA, 2010), and the Council on Accreditation (COA) recommends that caseloads not exceed 18 children per caseworker (COA, 2010). However, the *Child Welfare Workforce Survey: State and County Data and Findings* reported caseloads for individual child welfare workers ranged from 10 to 110 children, with workers handling an average of about 24 to 31 children each. This is double the recommended number (APHSA, 2001).

CWLA guidelines recommend not to exceed 12-15 children per caseworker. National studies report caseloads ranging from 10 to 110 children per caseworker.

Contributing to the workload problem is the increasing complexity of cases. Drug and alcohol abuse most often co-occurs with a finding of abuse and / or neglect, but is rarely the only serious issue. Poverty, substandard housing, mental illness, domestic violence, and HIV/ AIDS are often also present.

IMPROVING THE CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE

Research into the broken childcare system has been done by the federal government, the Public Child Welfare Association, the Children’s Defense Fund, countless individuals researchers through universities, and most recently, the Pew Foundation (Hansen). Inevitably at the top of every list of problems is inadequate funding leading to high caseloads, poor salaries, high employee turnover, and inadequately trained caseworkers and supervisors.

Research shows that the best outcomes for the child welfare system occur when the caseworkers have social work degrees. Studies of social service workers find that staff with social work degrees, either BSW’s or MSW’s, are better prepared than those without social work degrees. Texas research on CPS caseworkers show that social workers with BSW’s are, “less likely to to leave CPS during that year, more satisfied with their salary, and more educationally prepared to handle their job, and have more perceived respect from co-workers” (Leung, 2005).

Caseworkers with higher training, an increased perceived job performance, awareness of higher standards of social work values and ethical conduct, and high job satisfaction contribute greatly toward low employee turnover. As mentioned before there is a direct correlation between low retention rates and unmanageable caseloads.

A study in Texas of CPS caseworkers also suggested that “MSW’s are employed longer at CPS than those with just a BSW degree. MSW’s are more tenured staff, and are more likely to advance to administrative, supervisory or managerial positions, therefore lon-

gevity would be greater than those who possess only a bachelor's degree" (Leung, 2005).

The Pew Foundation report re-emphasized the increased success of caseworkers with a social work degree. The connection of workforce quality to family outcomes was further documented in a March 2003 report by the GAO. The report states, "A stable and highly skilled child welfare workforce is necessary to effectively provide child welfare services that meet federal goals" (GAO, 2003). "A direct relationship was found between the consistency and quality of caseworker visits with the child and family and the achievement of case outcomes evaluated in the Child and Family Services Reviews" (GAO, 2003).

The positive aspect about caseworker turnover is that nearly 60 percent is preventable (Hansen). A 1994 study in South Carolina found that social work education (particularly graduate social work education) reduces workers' burnout, a major cause of staff turnover. A 1995 study in Ohio found that, among nine variables of predictive of worker retention, three of the most important were: training; having had an internship in public child welfare as a part of preparation; and agency support (including strong supervision). A 1998 study examining the reasons child welfare workers remain in their positions longer than two years found that in addition and concern for, and satisfaction in, helping children, the two most decisive factor in employee retention were social work education and the climate of the work environment, including supportiveness of supervisors and peers. More than 80 percent of those who stayed beyond two years had completed at least one social work degree.

Child welfare work is stressful, intense decision-making and quality of work result in life and death consequences. "Caseworkers must be able to engage families through face-to-face contacts, assess the safety of children at risk of harm, monitor case progress, ensure that essential services and supports are provided, and facilitate the attainment of the desired permanency plan. This cannot be done if workers are unable to spend quality time with children, families, and caregivers (CWLA, 2010)."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The reality is that the last safety net for abused and neglected children is the child welfare system, and it has holes in it large enough for the most vulnerable in society to slip through. However, there are plausible, effective changes that can be made to close those gaps and help to ensure the quality of care every child and youth have a right to receive.

To provide families or family substitutes "safe, stable, and permanent homes for children" (NASW, 2009), the Texas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers suggests the following recommendations:

1. “An undergraduate social work degree should be required for the delivery, and a graduate social work degree should be required for the supervision and administration, of social services in public child welfare to ensure that workers have the necessary skills, knowledge, and values to provide high-quality services” (NASW, 2009);
2. An increase in professional training and strong supervision is vital to the recruitment and retention of professional social workers. Professional development and advanced training results in the enhancement of job performance, job satisfaction, and longevity of those advancing to supervisory positions, which in turn increases worker retention (Leung, P., 2005). Strong supervision better prepares the caseworkers and prepares them for the practical skills and knowledge needed to deal with the complexities that the child welfare system entail;
3. An increase in salaries so the child welfare workforce has competitive pay with fields that have comparative training and education. The salary increase will drastically increase worker retention, invest in the stability of the work environment, and better prepare caseworkers / supervisors to respond to reports of abuse and neglect;
4. It is imperative that caseloads are reduced. Hiring more educated and licensed social workers is necessary for caseloads to become manageable and so workers are afforded the time necessary to meet federal goals, guidelines, and key federal safety and permanency outcomes.

As Texans, we all have an obligation in insuring not only the safety and well-being of all of Texas’ children, but also in guaranteeing quality of care. Having educated social workers employed within the child welfare system, increasing training and opportunities for strong supervision, and ensuring competitive pay and manageable caseloads will help to ensure the commitment to our children’s future.

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