

Child Welfare Workforce and Training

ACTION

- Pass the Child Protection Services Workforce Improvement Act (H.R. 2437), which would offer new resources to state child welfare systems to improve the quality of services by increasing workforce capacity. It also provides forgiveness of education loans to students who become child welfare workers and expands access to federal training funds to approved private agencies that employ direct care workers, case managers, and others working in child welfare services.
- Pass the Child Protective Services Improvement Act (H.R.1534), which, in addition to providing new resources for child welfare system reforms, provides grants to state child welfare systems to improve quality of services by increasing the workforce. It forgives loans to certain students who become child welfare workers and expands access to federal training funds to private agencies.
- Pass S. 409, which provides loan forgiveness to professional social workers who work for child protective service agencies.

HISTORY

No issue has a greater effect on the capacity of the child welfare system to serve at-risk and vulnerable children and families than the shortage of a competent, stable workforce. This shortage affects agencies in every service field, including foster care and adoption, child protective services, child and youth care, social work, and support and supervision. The timely review of child abuse complaints, the monitoring and case management of children in foster care, the recruitment of qualified adoptive and foster families, and the management and updating of a modern, effective data collection system all depend on a fully staffed and qualified child welfare workforce.

Child welfare work is labor intensive. Workers must be able to engage families through face-to-face contacts, assess the safety and well-being of children through physical visits, monitor progress, ensure that essential services and supports are provided, help with problems that may develop, and attend to data collection and reporting requirements. A comprehensive child welfare system cannot be maintained if the foundation of workforce is crumbling. Workers frequently have caseloads that are two, three, or even four times what good practice demands. The end result is little time for caseworker training for new hires and no time for ongoing training. These workers may also face limited but necessary supervision. All of these factors, including concerns about worker safety, create a workplace that has high turnover and limited appeal when recruiting.

A 2003 General Accounting Office (GAO) report documented this crisis in the child welfare workforce, finding the child welfare system is seriously understaffed, undertrained, and undervalued. GAO found that workforce problems limit states' ability to meet the goals established in the mandated federal Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs). The report said, "Our analysis of the 27 available CFSRs corroborates caseworkers' experiences showing that staff shortages, high caseloads, and worker turnover were factors impeding progress toward the achievement of federal safety and permanency outcomes."¹

The CFSRs and the resulting state Program Improvement Plans (PIPs) present a clear picture of how workforce issues affect outcomes for children. The federal government has found through this process, designed to measure the performance of state child welfare systems, that states need additional workforce supports to make the improvements necessary to meet the needs of children and families. More than half the states that have submitted PIPs to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have addressed the need to improve workforce training, reduce caseloads, improve management, and provide better supervision.

A survey by CWLA and other organizations, as well as information from sources including the U.S. Department of Labor and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, confirm the workforce crisis in child welfare.² High

staff turnover in public and private agencies, the loss of direct service and supervisory staff, and the expected retirement of most experienced administrators over the next 10 years exacerbates this crisis. In addition, unlike many other human service agencies, and businesses in general, child welfare has little ability to control work intake.

One way to address this issue is through increased training resources and opportunities. The major federal child welfare programs include training supports. Training under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act is the largest and most important of these. An entitlement program, Title IV-E training allows states to claim a 75% federal match for allowable training of state and local agency staff and current and prospective foster and adoptive parents.

Some states have experienced significant problems in accessing and using Title IV-E training funds to support appropriate and needed training for staff in state-approved private agencies that meet federal eligibility criteria as child-serving institutions. This is a particular concern as states increasingly contract with private agencies to provide quality child welfare services and, ultimately, to improve outcomes for children and families in their care.

HHS defines which training activities and entities qualify for Title IV-E training reimbursement. In 1996, HHS requested public comment “concerning the implementation and management of child welfare training,” but HHS still has not issued any new guidance.³ The continued lack of clarification and inconsistency in guidance to the states has forced public and private agencies to cobble together strategies to support needed training.

The Child Protection Services Workforce Improvement Act (H.R. 2437) would be one step toward improving the child welfare workforce. Sponsored by Representative Pete Stark (D-CA), H.R. 2437 would authorize \$100 million annually for grants to state child welfare agencies and tribal governments to improve working conditions, including increasing wages, hiring more staff, and improving the education and training of workers and supervisors. The bill also authorizes a five-year, \$10 million annual demonstration program to forgive school loans for students who become child welfare workers.

Comprehensive child welfare legislation, the Child Protective Services Improvement Act (H.R. 1534), sponsored by Representative Ben Cardin (D-MD), also includes a section with many of the provisions of H.R. 2437 related to workforce supports.

Legislation pending in the Senate, S. 409, sponsored by Senator Mike DeWine (R-OH), focuses on providing loan forgiveness as a way to encourage and expand the child welfare workforce.

KEY FACTS

- Between January 1, 2002, and January 1, 2003, average turnover rates in private agencies were 45% for casework/case management positions, 57% for residential and youth care positions, and 44% for supervisors.⁴
- Between October 2000 and March 2001, the average turnover rates in private agencies were 36% for direct service staff and 38% for supervisors.⁵
- Between October 2000 and March 2001, the average turnover rates in public agencies were 20% for direct service staff and 8% for supervisors.⁶
- Between October 2000 and March 2001, private nonprofit agencies reported an average supervisory turnover rate of 38%, compared with 8% for public agencies.⁷
- In a 2003 GAO study, one-third of the 27 states reviewed cited workforce issues as a barrier to caseworkers’ ability to maintain diligent efforts to provide services to families to protect children in the home and prevent removal.⁸
- One-third of the states reported that workforce issues made it difficult for caseworkers to finalize adoptions with appropriate and timely efforts.⁹

- Twelve states reported they had problems with their caseworkers adequately monitoring safety and well-being through frequent visits with children, focusing on case planning, the delivery of services, and reaching goals for the family.¹⁰
- All 27 states reported problems providing adequate training and necessary staff development to reach the goals of safety and permanency set forth in the CFSR.¹¹
- Social work education, supportive supervision, and job flexibility are positively associated with performance and retention.¹²
- Less than one-third of staff employed in public child welfare agencies have a formal social work education.¹³
- The poor image of child welfare agencies has an adverse effect on morale and retention of qualified employees.¹⁴

SOURCES

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