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Child Welfare Workforce

Overview

According to the results of the Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA's) *2000 Membership Trends and Issues Survey*, public and private nonprofit agencies report that the greatest concerns for the child welfare field are the increasing number of children needing services and the lack of qualified staff.

No issue has a greater effect on the capacity of the child welfare system to effectively serve vulnerable children and families than the shortage of a competent and stable workforce. Without an adequate workforce, agencies are not able to adhere to national service and caseload standards, maintain a climate that supports the delivery of high quality services, or adopt evidence-based practices.

Nearly every American industry has experienced labor shortages at some time, but shortages in the helping professions are especially troublesome. Effectiveness in this area comes from increasing staff expertise, building rapport, and establishing stable, trusting relationships with children, families, and communities. These prerequisites for success are undermined by high turnover. Child welfare agencies experience turnover that frequently exceeds 50% per year. Position vacancy rates often surpass 12% (Drais-Parrillo, in press). The shortage of qualified workers affects these agencies at almost every level, including child and youth care staff, social workers, and support and administrative staff.

At the agency level, the current workforce crisis is evident in three ways. First, an insufficient number of qualified candidates are in the recruitment pool. Second, agencies are often unable to compete with other segments of the economy in terms of salary, benefits, and working conditions. Third, agencies are unable to retain workers.

These are not new challenges for child welfare agencies. In 1991, Helfgott reviewed literature and recommendations from child welfare leaders. It outlines many of the difficulties agencies report today. Items specifically cited as key challenges for staffing child welfare agencies were:

- increasingly complex demands for services and workloads,
- lack of resources for clients,
- insufficient training,
- inadequate financial compensation,
- safety and liability concerns, and
- poor physical and organizational working conditions.

In the past decade, these issues have not improved, and some have worsened. The cumulative effect

on agency service provision is complex and will not respond to a quick fix. Some of the solutions are so obvious to many child welfare professionals that formal research seems unnecessary. The lack of progress in resolving these problems, continued negative public perception of the child welfare field, and an unwillingness to invest public resources in children, families, and those who work with them, however, demand a multifaceted approach.

Because an adequate workforce is fundamental to the delivery of services by child welfare agencies, CWLA's Research to Practice (R2P) Initiative has selected it as a focus area. The expectation is that bringing together a summary of the literature and the research efforts to date will provide agencies and advocates with the foundation to make productive decisions and changes, whether they are revising the workforce policies of a small work unit or of a statewide system.

TRENDS

- The increasing number of children needing services and the lack of qualified staff affect children and families.
- Turnover often exceeds 50% per year in the child welfare field, and position vacancy rates often surpass 12%.

Literature Review

Historical Perspective

What is now being termed the *workforce crisis* has its roots in public policy decisions made over the past 30 years. During the early years of the 20th century, the U.S. Children's Bureau, in cooperation with universities and local agencies, built a child welfare system staffed by people with professional social work educations (Schorr, 2000). As a result, the preferred standard for employment became the master's of social work degree (MSW). Child welfare came to be viewed as a prestigious specialty within the social work profession (A. Ellett, 1996; Leighninger & Ellett, 1998).

In 1962, at the federal level, child welfare merged with public assistance, which traditionally placed less emphasis on educational qualifications of staff. Later, increased recognition of child abuse led to passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974. The enactment of state child abuse and neglect reporting laws followed, leading to an avalanche of child abuse reports. There was no provision of adequate resources for the preparation and support of additional staff required to respond to the reports, however (A. Ellett & Millar, 1996; Leighninger & Ellett, 1998). Consequently, states moved quickly to reduce staff qualifications to hire enough employees (A. Ellett, 1996).

In the wake of this "deprofessionalization," agencies began to structure child welfare work differently, attempting to reduce its complexity and make it possible for people with fewer qualifications to adequately perform required tasks. These efforts are reflected in practices such as specialization, which causes families to be passed from one caseworker to another as they move through various agency programs, and the purchase of external clinical services that were formerly provided by internal agency staff (A. Ellett, 1996; Schorr, 2000).

Attempts to reform the system during the 1980s and 1990s were largely devoid of attention to the fundamental issues of workforce quality and quantity. Instead, efforts focused on external monitoring from courts and review bodies (O'Donnell, 1992). As a result, the child welfare work environment evolved into one characterized by lowered autonomy, heightened regimentation, and increased documentation (A. Ellett, 1996; Reagh, 1994; Schorr, 2000).

Issues in Workforce

The professional literature contains a substantial body of writing based on descriptive data and observations of trends in policy and practice over the past two decades. When this work is considered as a whole, seven major areas of concern emerge.

Staff Qualifications and Selection

A national study (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988) revealed that only 28% of staff employed in public child welfare agencies had formal social work education. Recruitment and selection of qualified staff are hampered by the lack of accurate, realistic job descriptions necessary to ensure an applicant's understanding of the nature of the work and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for competent performance (Pecora, Briar, & Zlotnik, 1989; Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000).

Work Environment and Support

Work environment includes both the physical setting that agencies provide and the resources made available to support the staff's multiple tasks and responsibilities. Child welfare practice settings are often deficient in both these areas (Pecora et al., 1989).

Perhaps the most important element of the work environment, however, is not the physical setting, but the organizational infrastructure, which includes such factors as supervision, level of organizational support, professional culture, autonomy, and flexibility. Many authors suggest that as child welfare work becomes more highly structured and regulated, it no longer has the flexibility and autonomy that characterizes a true profession (A. Ellett, 1996; Reagh, 1994). In addition, policies to which staff must conform are too often driven by external forces such as legislation and the courts. These policies are not consistent with the evidence supporting good practice (Malm, Bess, Leos-Urbel, Green, & Markowitz, 2001).

Workload

Unlike many other human service agencies, child welfare, at least in the public sector, has little ability to control work intake. Workers view high caseloads (often two to three times the amount recommended by CWLA standards (CWLA, 1991, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000) and voluminous paperwork as the norm. Agencies are also subject to changes in legislation and policy that add to the duties associated with cases. A caseload standard, there-

fore, may be reasonable one year and unmanageable the next. The best examples of this are the increase in required documentation linked to the external reviews imposed by legislative changes and the time that caseworkers must spend in court or in meetings with review boards (C. Ellett, 1995; Malm et al., 2001; O'Donnell, 1992).

Salaries and Promotion Opportunities

Researchers point out that salaries in all areas of child welfare tend to be lower than in other jobs of comparable difficulty. As the need for social workers has expanded in other settings, this may discourage the best-qualified prospective employees from entering child welfare (Pecora et al., 1989). Agencies with a hierarchical organizational structure offer limited opportunities for promotion, and promotion typically requires that the caseworker move from direct service provision to management (C. Ellett, 1995).

Professional Development

Although professional development is valued by employees and can positively affect service delivery, both in-service training and continuing education opportunities are often greatly reduced or eliminated in times of fiscal shortfalls (Pecora et al., 1989). Even when continued learning opportunities are available, the mentoring and organizational support that staff need to transfer learning into performance may not be available (Alwon & Reitz, 2000). Furthermore, the regimented nature of work in many agencies discourages the exercise of judgment and decision-making that are critical to advanced skill development (Ewalt, 1991; Schorr, 2000).

Public Image and Professional Respect

The poor image of child welfare agencies has an adverse effect on morale and the ability of agencies to recruit and retain qualified employees (Ellett, 1995; Pecora et al., 1989). Lack of respect is shown in the attitudes of the public and the other professionals with whom child welfare staff must work each day. Staff reports of disrespectful

treatment by judges and legal professionals suggest that the interface between agencies and the courts is an area of particular difficulty in this regard (C. Ellett, 1995; Malm et al., 2001).

Media coverage of child welfare agencies is often poorly researched and overly sensationalized. Such publicity, especially in the wake of a child death, may promote quickly designed changes in policy and legislation that are unsettling to staff and have unintended adverse consequences (Malm et al., 2001).

Personal Safety and Liability

Concerns about staff safety have grown over the past two decades as agencies report working with an increasingly needy and disturbed client population. Likewise, situations in which staff are placed in personal jeopardy as a result of civil litigation arising from their professional duties have increased (Alwon & Reitz, 2000).

Workforce Research

Empirical exploration of workforce issues has focused primarily on the identification of factors that are related to either employee performance or turnover and retention.

Performance

Social Work Education

Education is the variable that child welfare workforce researchers have explored most often in relation to performance. Several studies have found evidence that social work education, at either the bachelor's or social work (BSW) or MSW level, positively correlates with performance.

A study conducted in Maryland public child welfare agencies found an MSW to be the best predictor of overall performance as measured by supervisory ratings and employee reports of work-related competencies (Booz-Allen & Hamilton, 1987). A national study (Lieberman et al., 1988) that measured competencies related to 32 job-related

MOVING FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

R2P encourages practitioners and agencies to make critical practice changes that reflect promising strategies and research findings featured in this Roundup. CWLA can provide comprehensive consultation on practice planning and implementation that can improve your agency's workforce status. Assistance is also available in establishing an evaluation component for existing programs or practices. R2P welcomes inquiries or information about your successful efforts to improve the child welfare workforce or other child welfare-related issues. Please send them to r2p@cwla.org.

For additional information about the R2P Initiative, visit www.cwla.org/programs/r2p. To further your understanding of CWLA's Workforce Initiative, visit www.cwla.org/programs/trieschman.

duties found that both MSW and BSW staff were better prepared for child welfare work than their colleagues without social work education. Research conducted with staff in Kentucky's public child welfare agency also revealed that staff with social work degrees scored significantly better on state merit examinations, received somewhat higher ratings from their supervisors, and had higher levels of work commitment than other staff (Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1990). A Nevada study (Albers, Reilly, & Rittner, 1993) showed that caseworkers who had a social work degree were significantly more likely to create a permanent plan for children in their caseloads within three years than their colleagues without social work education. In a study of professional staff in the public child welfare systems in Arkansas and Louisiana, Ellett (2000) found that social work education was associated with higher self-reported professional self-efficacy.

Much of the research on the effect of education has focused on the agency-university partnership programs that have been established over the past decade using federal funding provided by Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. Although there is variability in these programs, they generally aim to increase educational opportunities for agency staff to add to the pool of potential child welfare employees and enhance the relevance of curricula in schools of social work.

Research to examine their effects found that students score significantly higher on measures of job-related competencies (Fox, Burnham, Barbee, & Yankeelov, 2000; Okamura & Jones, 1998). Graduates of the specialized child welfare program in New York State had higher levels of skills, confidence, and sensitivity to clients (Hopkins, Mudrick, & Rudolph, 1999).

Turnover and Retention

Social Work Education

Some research has also linked social work education to employee retention in child welfare. Russell (1987) found that agencies that require social work degrees experience lower turnover rates. A study

conducted in Maine's public child welfare agency suggested that relevant education was related to retention (Bernotavicz, n.d.). Ellett (2000) found an association between social work education and self-reported intent to remain employed in child welfare.

Studies have also shown that graduates of specialized child welfare social work education programs are more likely to remain in child welfare and experience greater job satisfaction (Harrison, 1995; Okamura & Jones, 1998; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991). Lewandowski (1998) found that BSW graduates of an agency-sponsored education program in Kansas tended to remain employed longer than MSWs. This finding may be linked to the case management nature of the public agency jobs, which do not allow MSWs to fully use the clinical and decisionmaking skills they learn in master's programs.

Personal Factors

A small body of research has also explored personal characteristics of staff in relation to turnover and retention. Anderson (1994) found that higher ratings on the Coping Strategies Inventory were associated with intent to remain in child welfare even in the presence of high levels of emotional exhaustion. Other researchers have found commitment, investment, and a sense of mission to be significantly related to retention (Bernotavicz, n.d.; Harrison, 1995; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994). Higher

levels of professional self-efficacy and human caring are also associated with employee intent to remain (A. Ellett, 2000; C. Ellett, 1995).

Work Environment and Support

Other factors with a significant role in employee retention relate primarily to the organizational aspects of the environment. These include organizational support (Ellett, 2000; Midgely, Ellett, Noble, Bennett, & Livermore, 1994; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991), supervision, and flexibility in job assignments (Bernotavicz, n.d.; Harrison, 1995; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992; Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, 2001). In studies that include staff interviews, supportive supervision is the most commonly cited variable

WORKFORCE

- Less than a third of staff employed in public child welfare agencies have formal social work education.
- Salaries in public and private child welfare agencies are lower than in other comparable jobs.
- The increased regulation of public child welfare work, combined with external decisionmaking, make this an unattractive job setting for professionals.
- The poor image of child welfare agencies has an adverse effect on morale and the retention of qualified employees.
- Concerns about staff safety have grown over the past two decades.

related to turnover and retention. Caseworkers differentiate supervisory support from that of the larger agency, and their comments suggest that they view it as more significant.

Workload

Some studies have found an association between lower workload and retention (CWLA, 2001; Samantrai, 1992; Winefield & Barlow, 1995). Workload is also cited as a negative factor in research exploring job satisfaction (Midgley et al., 1994). Staff report increased clerical work, preparation for court, and time in court as major factors increasing workload, leading to loss of time with clients and diminishing their satisfaction (C. Ellett, 1995; Malm et al., 2001).

Salary and Promotions

Research concerning the role of salary and promotional opportunities as factors in turnover and retention has had mixed results. In a 1984 study, Jayaratne and Chess found both salary and promotion to be significant factors in job satisfaction. A national survey of public and private agencies conducted by CWLA (2001), however, showed no relationship between these factors and retention.

Implications for Policy and Practice

A content analysis of workforce research reveals the strongest empirical support for social work education, supportive supervision, and job flexibility as factors positively associated with either performance or retention in child welfare.

Although the evidence related to educational qualifications is not unequivocal, it provides support for social work education as the best preparation for practice in child welfare. These findings tend to be most consistent with regard to graduates of specialized education programs offering enhanced child welfare content and internships in child welfare settings. Such agency-university partnerships have the potential to improve employee retention and performance.

There is evidence that at least for some jobs in child welfare, employees with BSWs may be better suited than those with master's degrees (Dhooper

et al., 1990; Lewandowski, 1998). This finding may be related to the increased regimentation that has come to characterize child welfare jobs over the past 20 years. If agencies are to attract and maintain people with MSWs, they will need to create jobs that provide a greater degree of autonomy and make use of the employees' advanced skills.

The strength of supervision as a factor in retention across several studies suggests that agencies may benefit greatly from focusing resources on the support and development of supervisors. Valued

supervision in child welfare takes the form of support and consultation rather than strict direction and monitoring (Rycraft, 1994). Accordingly, selection and training for supervisory positions should emphasize these qualities. The critical nature of this role also indicates that agencies may benefit from targeting supervisors for greater organizational support and devising ways for them to have greater input in decisionmaking.

Flexibility in job assignment allows employees to find the best fit between job expectations and their skills and aptitudes (Rycraft, 1994). The strength of this finding is encouraging because it is within the power of creative managers to provide greater flexibility in job description and assignment.

FINDINGS

- Employees with higher social work education perform more positively.
- Agencies that require social work degrees experience lower rates of staff turnover.
- Lower workload is positively associated with staff retention.
- Social work education, supportive supervision, and job flexibility are positively associated with performance and retention.
- Agency-university partnerships can improve employee retention and performance.

Implications for Future Research

Studies need to empirically establish the duties and competencies associated with child welfare work. Such research would provide the basis for developing job descriptions that more accurately depict job requirements and for setting and defending education standards (Pecora et al., 1989; Gambrill, 1997).

Researchers should explore the relationship between workforce factors, as staff qualifications, workload, and stability, and client outcomes. The effective deployment of resources is informed by studies that tie successful interventions to staff qualifications and workload (Pecora et al., 1989) and that compare the cost-effectiveness of external purchase of services with the provision of agency staff capable of performing these functions.

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Research to Practice

With the advice of program staff and leaders in the field, CWLA's Research to Practice (R2P) Initiative identifies well-researched, effective methods and practices in public and private agencies, both CWLA member agencies and others, that affect the lives of children, youth, families, and communities in a positive way.

Agency staff, an outside individual or group, or a university may have conducted the qualitative or quantitative research or evaluation component. R2P's goal is to support and promote the implementation of well-researched, evaluated methods. (See box on Research to Practice Levels of Rigor.)

CWLA disseminates information about these programs and practices, as well as strategies for implementation or replication, to its member agencies and the field through a variety of media, workshops, consultation, and development services.

Topics the R2P Initiative is initially exploring include youth development and mentoring, family reunification, workforce issues, behavioral health, brain research and early childhood development, and juvenile justice.

For further information, visit R2P's website at www.cwla.org/programs/r2p, or contact the R2P team by e-mail at r2p@cwla.org.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE LEVELS OF RESEARCH RIGOR

Each program or practice included in the R2P Initiative has been identified as effective, with successes supported by a research component. R2P has developed four categories to describe the level of empirical support available. All programs and practices exist within an organizational context, with many factors that may influence outcomes.



Exemplary Practice

Research in this category has the following characteristics: a randomized study, a control group, posttests or pre- and posttests, effects sustained for at least one year, and multiple replications.



Commendable Practice

Research in this category has most of the following characteristics: a randomized or quasi-experimental study, a control or comparison group, posttests or pre-and posttests, follow up, and replication.



Emerging Practice

Research in this category has most of the following characteristics: a quasi-experimental study, a correlational or ex post facto study, posttest only, single group pre- and posttest, and a comparison group.



Innovative Ideas

Research in this category has most of the following characteristics: a case study, descriptive statistics only, and treatment group only.



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