

Child Welfare News #27—January 2006

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Recruiting and Retaining Child Welfare Workers

The issue of recruiting and retaining a competent child welfare workforce is drawing increasing attention in policy and research circles. Several factors nationally, including the federal Child and Family Services Reviews and class action lawsuits in some states, have underscored the importance of a workforce that can capably assess and deliver services to families. Failure to recruit and retain competent workers results in high turnover, staff shortages, high caseloads and poor outcomes for families, according to a review of research conducted by the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR).

To learn more about effective staff retention strategies, the IASWR conducted an extensive review of studies on this topic. The authors focused on retention, since recruitment of staff most likely to stay was determined to be one of the strategies toward increased retention.

It will come as no surprise to people familiar with similar national studies that the authors found great variation across states in the educational - and other requirements - for child welfare workers. (None of the studies looked at Minnesota's child welfare workforce.) They also found a wide range of definitions and methodologies used in the research. Nevertheless, they were able to draw the following conclusions, based on their review of the 25 studies that met their research criteria:

Professional commitment to children and families and level of education are the most consistent personal characteristics that positively affect retention. Supervisory support and workload/caseload are the most consistent organizational factors that positively affect retention (IASWR, p.4). The full report, "Factors Influencing Retention of Child Welfare Staff: A Systematic Review of Research" is available at www.iaswresearch.org.

The results uphold the efforts of Minnesota's Title IV-E funded training, such as the Master's in Social Work (MSW) programs at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities

and Duluth campuses, and the more recently initiated Title IV-E and Children's Bureau supported BSW IV-E programs.

The authors call for more evaluation of the impact of training and education on the child welfare field. The Title IV-E MSW University of Minnesota programs are part of a multi state/university effort exploring the feasibility of examining the impact of Title IV-E education on child and family outcomes.

Determining Child Protection Interventions That Work

When a child protection worker views a child in imminent danger as a less urgent case - proving fatal to the child - the reasons for this error must be found. Media attention most commonly vilifies the "negligent" case manager or produces a hackneyed portrait of the overwhelmed child protection system, without arriving at any real answers to the tragedy. Eileen Munro, of the London School of Economics, decided to find a new framework for investigating such child welfare problems and then evaluate the results. She presented her work at a November 3 CASCW forum.

Although flaws could easily be found with overarching policies that were difficult to implement or monitor, ultimately, they were not the source for disparities between the system's ideology and outcomes. Through her research, Munro found that the medical profession has a very different approach to assessing and addressing errors in judgment. Munro stated that child welfare systems tended to use "the charm of the counterfactual." That is, in examining a fatal error, one misjudgment would be pinpointed and deemed applicable to all future cases - thereby increasing the protocols that would safeguard against repetition of this error, without examining the context in which the problem had occurred. A medical review board, on the other hand, would tend to focus on the way in which information had been presented and the way in which it could have been better conveyed and processed. So, Munro decided to research forensic cases with a new set of questions - or at least use questions that were newer to the human services field. Borrowing the medical framework, Munro set out to look at the particulars of a case within the larger scope of how social workers are trained and how they must work.

In applying this approach to a Wisconsin child welfare unit, she found that contextual problems of work pressures combined with negative media portrayals made it difficult to recruit and retain skilled staff. Employee turnover tended to create a system in which the emphasis on training placed procedures first and children second. This combined with the tendency to focus on the "counterfactual" often led to policy and procedure manuals of up to 300 pages. Given the demands on a social worker's day, these volumes were virtually unusable. The demands of documenting cases also created a situation in which social workers spent only a third of their time with children and families and two-thirds of their time documenting that contact. Varied funding streams, led to documentation of workers' time in ways that were easy to count, but often missed measuring meaningful client information.

Beyond system error(s) came the human error(s) that sometimes led to fatality. Starting from the assumption that the worker was trying to do his/her job well, it became necessary to examine the worker's "world" in order to assess why the error happened. What were the circumstances in which the error occurred? After accompanying a Wisconsin social worker on a home visit, Munro was better able to understand how a child welfare worker tends to conceptualize a task. In order to contend with too much data - or data "noise" - the worker settles into a pattern of "tunneling" (i.e., focusing on specific details, while ignoring others). She also found that most workers lack adequate skills for interviewing the child(ren) or the father, so tended to focus most attention on the mother.

Workforce turnover also contributed to a shortage of workers with enough experience to trust their "emotional wisdom" - an intuitive sense regarding a client's emotions, issues of transference, the impact of the abuse, and family dynamics. This tendency reflected back to reduced time for worker supervision. Munro stated that in the United Kingdom an increase in paperwork had left less time for consultation and training.

Unit goals were frequently ambiguous and more often rewarded workers for completed paperwork than thoughtful analysis. Audits tended to reinforce such practices. And, workers often did not have measures to gauge child well-being. School benchmarks were typically the closest indicators used.

Munro advocates for an end to the data/documentation overload and a movement toward designing assessment tools that assist child welfare professionals in processing data. Tools and supervision should allow workers to develop intuition as well as a greater understanding of the interface of systems that affect child welfare clients. Ultimately, case management should be a dialogue between workers and families.

State and tribal judges and a Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) representative responded to Eileen Munro's talk. Senior appeals examiner, Inta Sellars, and, Terri Stoneburner, appeals court judge, agreed that the adversarial nature between social services and legal systems created communication barriers. Human services training regarding what is viewed as "evidence" in a court of law is needed. Insufficient evidence, in the eyes of the law, was most often cited as the reason for overriding a child welfare worker's recommendations - contributing to worker burnout.

Anita Fineday, chief judge for the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, described ways in which her tribal court had reduced the adversarial overtone common to egregious harm cases. Children were welcomed at court hearings, granted private access to her in her chambers, and given her phone number to call outside of court. In this way, children were not put in a position where they might be intimidated by parents, lawyers or social workers. And, in recognition of cultural priorities, parents might have their rights suspended, but never terminated. Fineday noted that since 1998, when tribal courts were first opened to child welfare cases, the result of such accommodations were zero appeals or deaths.

Erin Sullivan-Sutton, director of the Children's Services Unit at the Department of Human Services, praised practices such as those of Judge Fineday. She advocated for child welfare training that focused on parents as the best resources for children and an assessment of child well-being in the context of family well-being. Like Fineday, she hoped for an effort to heal, rather than punish or stigmatize deeply troubled families.

Forum audience members tended to agree with the changes encouraged by Munro and others. While the process for changing federal and state ideologies to help families rather than focus on abuse will be complex it should lead to a system in which child welfare workers can act on their belief that each child and each family are unique and deserve individual assessment, rather than fearing that the stakes in doing so are too high.

Eileen Munro's presentation was the first in a series of interdisciplinary seminars focused on rethinking the fate of children in high risk families. Audience evaluations will guide CASCW in determining the topic for the next seminar.

Outcomes for African American Children in Minnesota's Child Protection System

Following a 2001 Minnesota legislative charge, the Department of Human Services (DHS) convened the African American Disparities Advisory Committee. The committee, composed of members from the African American community, state and county child welfare professionals, educators, and child advocacy groups sought to examine 2002 child protection outcomes for African American children. (Their report, Study of Outcomes for African American Children in Minnesota's Child Protection System, can be found at: <http://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Legacy/MS-1943-ENG>)

The African American Disparities Committee's study addressed one principle recommendation and action step from the initial DHS study: to "conduct a case review in Anoka, Hennepin, Olmsted and Ramsey Counties to assess the appropriateness of decision making, including level, type and delivery of services."

County and state staff reviewed 206 neglect cases, matching 103 pairs of African American and Caucasian children. The cases were matched on age, gender, reason for referral, and county. The study reviewed only neglect cases, which are the most common referrals for African American children. A paired analysis was used to examine racial disparities. The cases began at the time of substantiation and were followed through until at least 18 months after substantiation.

From this study, several observations were noted. Although there were differences in the nature of the families' problems and the subsequent decisions, "there were no statistically significant differences between African American and Caucasian children for case services and case outcomes at assessment, case management in the home and reunification services."

When the investigators examined the interaction between race and other case characteristics, there were marked differences in intensity of agency intervention. Caucasian children, through age four, were much more likely to be referred for reunification services (i.e. they were in care long enough for a placement decision), whereas African American children from ages five through nine were more likely to be referred. In fact, referral of Caucasian children to reunification services dropped off virtually completely during this latter age span. Likelihood of intensive intervention - placement out of home long enough to require reunification services - increased if the worker noted in the record that either an African American child's mother had drug abuse problems or a Caucasian child's mother had financial problems.

The source of the disproportionality was not found in this analysis. What was found were significant differences in the dynamics of the cases based on race. By elimination of case dynamics in neglect only samples, the study suggests other potential sources for the disproportionality. As for cases that are not neglect only, the study focused on systematic bias in the reporting, small but significant bias at substantiation, and accumulation of African American children who waited longer for adoption (Ards, Myers & colleagues 2003).

Some practice change recommendations were: 1) targeted and ongoing attention to potential for bias in child protective services, 2) special attention to case processing activities in reporting and substantiation, family support, reunification, and permanency planning and implementation. These recommendations were to be implemented in four steps: dissemination, planning for change, implementing change strategies, and evaluating changes in practice.

The African American Comparative Review Study Report 2005, conducted by Minnesota Department of Human Services and researchers from the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work, led by Susan Wells, has recently been released and can be found on the Department of Human Services website at:
<http://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Legacy/DHS-4575-ENG>

References

Ards, S. D., Myers, S.L. Jr., Malkis, A., Surgrue, E., & Zhou, L. L. (2003). Racial disproportionality in reported and substantiated child abuse and neglect; an examination of systematic bias. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 25(5/6), 521-538.

Racial Disparities in Rates of Foster Care and Maltreatment: How Does Minnesota Compare?

In 2003, the rate of maltreatment and foster care for specific minority groups within Minnesota was found to be significantly greater than national rates. The greatest difference observed was in the American Indian population. For Minnesota, the rate of cases of maltreatment for American Indian youth was 34 per 1,000 compared to the national rate of 21 per 1,000. The second largest difference between national and state data for maltreatment was experienced by blacks, with a rate of 31 per 1,000 compared to the national rate of 20 per 1,000. Minnesota, in fact, has higher rates of maltreatment

for all other groups compared to the nation, except for whites, which had a rate of four per 1,000 compared to 11 per 1,000, respectively.

Foster care follows the same patterns with Minnesota minorities experiencing higher rates of children in foster care compared to the nation as a whole. The largest difference between state and national foster care rates is found in the American Indian population. For every 1,000 American Indian youth in Minnesota, 97 are in foster care compared to 16 per 1,000 youth in foster care for the nation. Blacks also show a large difference between state and national rates. For every 1,000 black youth in Minnesota, 47 are in foster care. The national rate for black youth is 21 per 1,000.

Although the causes remain unclear, the Report described above provided some promising recommendations for practice changes that can begin to address the disparities.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. (2003). Child Maltreatment, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, and Children's Bureau, Washington, DC; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2003). The AFSCARS Report, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, and Children's Bureau, Washington, DC (www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb)

Minn-LInK Charts High School Graduation Rates

The importance of a high school diploma to achieving success in adulthood is well-documented. Failure to graduate is correlated with high personal and societal costs, including homelessness, criminal justice involvement, teen pregnancy and public assistance. Minnesota consistently ranks among the top states in high school graduation rates. In 2005, the National Center for Education Statistics ranked the state fifth from the top with a graduation rate of 82%. However, the graduation rate for adolescents who have been in the child welfare system is much lower.

The Center's Minn-LInK Project analyzed the high school progress and graduation records of over 500 older adolescents who had been determined to have been neglected or abused by their parents or other caretakers were reviewed to learn more about their educational outcomes. Among the findings:

Adolescents in the child welfare system graduated at less than two-thirds the rate of other youth. 47% of the students who had been abused or maltreated and were enrolled as seniors in the 2002-2003 school year were recorded as graduated in spring 2003, compared to 80% of the rest of the students.*

Those most likely to graduate were white. Black or African-American youth had the lowest graduation rate.

Although only a relatively small group of the adolescents were currently, or had recently been, in an out of home placement such as foster care, they were somewhat more likely to have graduated than those youth who had not experienced a recent placement.

Adolescents who were receiving special education services were less likely to graduate than those not receiving special education services.

A small proportion of the adolescents were identified as gifted and talented; these adolescents very likely to graduate.

Looking at the broader group of older adolescents (not just seniors) who had been maltreated:

Seventy-five percent were determined to be making educational progress (defined in the report). Those experiencing educational setbacks, such as pregnancy, entering treatment facilities and dropping out of school, were disproportionately black/African-American or American Indian (compared to the Minnesota population), eligible for free meals (i.e., very low income) and from a metropolitan county. The most common type of maltreatment experienced by adolescents was neglect. One of the primary recommendations of the study is to improve the coordination between school districts and county social service agencies and to ensure that school records follow students in a timely manner. While the results will not surprise those with experience in the field, they do provide data against which to measure future progress and change and suggest areas for future analysis, including their wages and pursuit of post-secondary education.

**This study calculated graduation rates differently than others due to the nature of the data available for analysis. Therefore, while the graduation rates can be compared across groups within this study, it is difficult to compare these rates with rates calculated using other methods in other studies.*

CASCW and ATC Reach Their One-Year Anniversary

In January 2006, the Area Training Centers (ATC) Project will reach its one-year anniversary of joint in-service training efforts with CASCW. The ATC's - as part of the Minnesota Child Welfare Training System (MCWTS) - provide the statewide regionalized structure and serve as the liaison for training issues between Minnesota's Department of Human Services (DHS) and their respective counties. This connection between the University and DHS is especially important as it provides for an ongoing educational connection with social workers in the field. Minnesota law requires new child protection social workers to attend core training and at least 15 credit hours of relevant training annually. This training is generally provided by MCWTS.

Trainings, which are either categorized as "core" or "specialized and related," are offered throughout the year. A quarterly average of 795 social workers and supervisors are in attendance. In fall 2005, MCWTS debuted the newly designed Rule 79 Case Management training series, which marks a new connection between MCWTS and DHS's Children's Mental Health Unit. The number of cross-training opportunities is expected to increase with time. And, the ATC Project - along with CASCW - will continue to be an integral part of the future of employment-based social work education.

Recruiting News

CASCW administers a scholarship available to students who are committed to improving the quality of public (county or state) services to children and families. If you or someone you know wishes to apply to the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work MSW or Ph.D. program and are interested in obtaining more information on the scholarship, the application process, the child welfare curriculum, or post-graduation employment requirements, please contact Karen Moon by email at kmoon@che.umn.edu or by phone at (612) 625-8121 or visit our prospective student site (<http://cehd.umn.edu/SSW/cascw/students/iveScholarship>).

This fall, CASCW signed an underwriting agreement with KFAI - Fresh Air public radio (www.kfai.org) to promote the School of Social Work's dedication to educating and supporting graduate students committed to social justice issues. From September 12 through November 23, our announcement was read on the following programs: Conversations with Al McFarlane, Regional Indigenous News, and Centro Cultural Chicano. Evaluation of applications for admission in fall 2006 will determine if this type of recruitment was effective.

CASCW would like to thank all IV-E alumni (as well as members of the BSW IV-E Consortium) who referred prospective applicants to us this fall or participated in the fall MSW/IV-E information meetings held at the School and within the metro area. Specifically, we would like to acknowledge the following alumni for their efforts: (Alfreda) Joyce Becenti ('00), Don Bibeau ('97), Charissa Bryant ('96), Jacqueline Coleman ('01), Chris Hill ('02), Vanessa Graddick ('05), and Randy Snyder ('03), as well as current MSW IV-E student, Naomi Stock.

Alumni News

The Center is pleased to announce its first Ph.D. IV-E graduate, Jessica Toft. Her dissertation is entitled, *Low-Income Mothers' Citizenship in the Time of Welfare Reform*. Jessica is now a faculty member at the University of St. Thomas/College of St. Catherine School of Social Work. She will be presenting her dissertation research at the Society for Social Work Research in San Antonio in January 2006 and at the Council on Social Work Education in Chicago in February 2006.

We would like to thank IV-E MSW alumnus, Born Chea ('01), Senior Social Worker in Adoptions at Hennepin County, for sharing information on his job, as well as current issues in adoption, for CASCW's (November) National Adoption Month display.