The Social Service Workforce and the Practice of Working With Vulnerable Children and Families

Child Protection in Crisis/Global Social Service Workforce Alliance

February 19, 2014

Joan Levy Zlotnik, PhD, ACSW
Director, Social Work Policy Institute
National Association of Social Workers Foundation
jzlotnik@naswdc.org  www.socialworkpolicy.org
The State of the Evidence Concerning Social Service Workforce Strengthening

- Recruitment & Retention of the Right Workforce: Lessons from Research.
Important Message

No simple answers to complex problems
Well-being: Parallel Process

Child

SUPPORTIVE NURTURED CAREGIVERS

PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

SAFE & SECURE LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Reasonable Workloads

Child Welfare Worker

SUPPORTIVE & EDUCATIONAL SUPERVISION

Quality Organizational Culture & Climate

ECONOMIC SECURITY

SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE & RESOURCES TO IMPLEMENT EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS
Making Workforce Improvement a Priority

• Child welfare workforce crisis
  • Turnover is costly ($$ & child and family outcomes).
    • (higher turnover = higher # of moves in foster care)
    • (costs – training, rehiring, impact on remaining workers)
  • Paperwork, agency environment & supports, caseload impact the workforce.
  • Difficulty attracting the “right” workers.
    – What professional qualifications would be optimal?
    – What are the minimum qualifications?
    – Continual questioning – Is social work the right (necessary) degree for child welfare work?
Retention Factors

• Quality Supervision
  – Attributes of supervisors
  – Skills in mentoring
  – High level of practice knowledge
  – Workers that stay attach to supervisors

• Professional social workers who stay don’t report supervision problems (NASW, 2004)

• If you want Social Work Supervisors – hire social workers and then promote them.
Administrative Supervision

- Provide leadership to unit
- Select and train staff
- Manage performance and workflow
- Communicate agency priorities and policies

Educational Supervision

- Case staffing and reviews
- Provide professional development and application of training
- Monitor practice
- Promote evidence-based practice
- Promote ethical and culturally competent practice
- Promote teamwork

Supportive Supervision

- Prevent and address secondary trauma, burn-out and stress
- Anticipate and address safety and risk factors
- Build and maintain morale and job satisfaction
- Create a learning environment and opportunities for peer support
Retention Factors

• Personal Factors
  – Those who remain – higher job satisfaction, goodness of fit, preference for child welfare, professional commitment
  – Stronger commitment to child welfare – stronger intention to remain (see also NASW study)
  – Workers who received funding to go to school to earn a social work degree – commitment to stay
  – Connection between human caring and intention to remain (Alberta Ellett, U of Georgia & colleagues)
  – Those without previous experience and exposure most likely to leave
  – Those with most employment options might be most likely to leave
Retention Factors

• Organizational Factors
  • Manageable workload
  • Peer support
  • Feeling valued
  • Opportunities for advancement
  • Personal and psychological safety
  • Availability of resources
  • Salary and benefits – people who leave make more $$
What Strategies and Conditions Influence the Retention of Staff in Public Child Welfare?

**POSITIVE PERSONAL FACTORS**
- Professional commitment to children and families
- Previous work experience
- Education
- Job satisfaction
- Self-efficacy
- Personal characteristics
  - Age/Bilingual

**NEGATIVE PERSONAL FACTORS**
- Burnout
- Emotional exhaustion
- Role overload
- Conflict/stress

**ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS**
- Supervisory support
- Coworker support
- Better salary
- Reasonable workload
- Opportunities for advancement
- Organizational commitment and valuing employees

**STRATEGY**
- Tuition, leave & fees supported for BSW and MSW education for child welfare staff
The Problem -- Do the math!!!

- APHSA 2004 study – top reasons for turnover related to caseload/workload.
- Focus on workload – reflects differential patterns of staffing, structure and service delivery.
- Impacts safety, permanency and well-being of children – insufficient visits/engagement/assessment.
- Workers leave because they are overwhelmed or they stay and just manage – burn out (minimal performers)
Negative Factors

• Burn-out
  – Emotional exhaustion
  – Depersonalization
  – Lack of personal accomplishment

• Negative organizational environment can lead to or reinforce personal factors

• Work and family life imbalance

• Lack of commitment – no “goodness of fit”

• Those with the least relevant and/or least education – most likely to leave.
Linking Workforce and Outcomes

- Support High Quality & Supportive Supervision
- Build Healthy Organizational Culture and Climate
- Create and Sustain University-Agency Partnerships
- Promote Policies that Fund Training and Social Work Education
- Apply Evidence-Informed Retention Strategies
- Support Professional Social Work Education for Staff

BETTER CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES
Components of an Effective CW Workforce (CDF/CR Child Welfare Policy Workgroup)

14

- Supportive Organizational Environment
- Manageable Caseloads & Workloads
- Meaningful Supervision & Mentoring
- Recruitment & Retention of a Knowledgeable, Skilled Child Welfare Workforce Able to Successfully Deliver Quality Services and Supports to Vulnerable Children & Families
- Positive Experiences & Outcomes for Children & Families
- Effective Stewardship of Public Funds
- Effective Quality Assurance & Accountability
- Timely & Accurate Data & Information
- Practice-Enhancing Research & Evaluation
- Authentic Cultural Competence
- Significant Family & Community Connectedness
- Equitable Employment Incentives
- Safe & Suitable Working Conditions
- Useful Technological Resources
- Strong & Consistent Leadership

Comprehensive, Integrated Services for Children, Youth & Families
Implications for University/Agency Partnerships

• Schools of social work are uniquely positioned to support improved agency outcomes (research, analysis, evaluation, consultation, technical assistance & professional development).

• Funding to support students to pursue child & family careers -- educational preparation and training are important.

• Implementation and sustainability are major issues – the university can help.

• Universities have multiple roles for greater engagement with agencies and service delivery improvements.

• Develop research-based briefs to address workforce policy improvements.
Improvement through Policy Change

- Promote the importance of workforce to outcomes for children and specific practice and policy improvements
- Expand the knowledge base on links between workforce and child outcomes
- Promote and build on promising approaches in states, public and private agencies, and universities
- Translate lessons learned into policy changes and better outcomes for children
Achieving Sustainable Solutions

- Leadership support and consistency
- Creating and sustaining a “learning community”
- Investment at every level of the service delivery system
- Investment by the governor and legislature
- Public investment in child welfare – own the system
Resources for Moving Forward

• **Supervision: The Safety Net for Front-Line Practice**

• **Children at Risk: Optimizing Health in an Era of Reform**

• **Educating Social Workers for Child Welfare Practice: The Status of Using Title IV-E Funding to Support BSW & MSW Education**

• **Investing in the Social Work Workforce**
Resources for Moving Forward

• Factors Influencing Retention: Systematic Review of the Research

• CDF/Children’s Rights National Child Welfare Workforce Policy Workgroup

• Child Welfare Information Gateway:
  http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/mgmt_supervision/

• National Child Welfare Workforce
  http://www.ncwwi.org/

• Social Care Institute of Excellence
  www.scie.org.uk