

Child Welfare Workplace: The State of the Workforce and Strategies to Improve Retention

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Child welfare systems throughout the United States are being closely scrutinized as sensational cases appear in the media in nearly every state. At the federal level, with the Child and Family Service Review process, the government is documenting that states across the country are not conforming to federal child welfare requirements (DHHS, 2007) put in place to ensure the safety and well-being of children. One of the most crucial underlying causes of these inadequacies is a workforce that lacks the manpower for the tasks it confronts. To meet performance standards for the seven major Adoption and Safe Family Act child welfare safety outcomes, child protection agencies must stop the outward flow of staff from the workplace. This paper presents a study examining correlates related to retention. It was found supervisors and co-workers play a crucial role in the retention of workers. Strategies are presented aimed at assisting states in ways to slow the turnover rate of workers in child welfare.

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Until public child welfare agencies can secure a stable, sufficient workforce with the necessary knowledge and experience, states will continue to fall short on the CFSR process and in their efforts to protect children. Because caseworker turnover has a major impact on staffing, strategies must be explored that will improve the average longevity of caseworkers in the field of child welfare and, thus, the safety of children. Cyphers (2002) found, in general, turnover rates for child protective service workers (caseworkers and supervisors) for FY 2000 averaged 20%, although they were as high as 38% in some states. Without a professional, competent, and motivated child welfare workforce that receives ongoing training, society will not begin to meet the challenges faced in combating child maltreatment and its lasting effects.

The complexities around work with families and children who experience child maltreatment are tremendous. The knowledge and skill required goes beyond a bachelor's or master's degree in social work; specialization in understanding the dynamics involved in the phenomenon of child maltreatment is needed. Additionally, it is not only the child welfare system that addresses the issues surrounding child abuse, but also law enforcement, the courts, the medical profession, the school system, and the general public. All CPS workers must navigate these systems, in addition to obtaining specific competencies to effectively work with families and children who experience child maltreatment. Retention and turnover among child welfare workers must be examined to ensure a workforce that will meet the challenges faced within the child welfare field.

This article presents a brief review of the current empirical literature on retention and turnover of child welfare workers, since an extensive review can be found elsewhere (Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; CWLA, 2002, 2003). The main focus is the presentation

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of findings from a longitudinal study examining antecedent variables related to why some child welfare caseworkers leave while others stay. The study includes only caseworkers, not supervisors. Additionally, the findings examine how well prepared workers felt after a six-week intensive training program and what areas of competencies needed strengthening after three- and 18-month periods.

Review of the Empirical Literature

Although studies exist that address the issues of child welfare worker (CPS) retention and turnover, they are scattered in their focus and approach. Some look at retention and turnover rates or look specifically at variables influencing worker decisions. Others focus on identifying problematic issues such as high workloads and caseloads; too much time spent on paperwork, travel, courts, and meetings; workers' feeling valued by their agencies; low salaries; and supervision problems (Cyphers, 2002). This review focuses on predictors of turnover, retention, and job satisfaction.

Predictors of Turnover

Not surprisingly, one of the strongest predictors of turnover is worker dissatisfaction with compensation (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; United States General Accounting Office [US GAO], 2003; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2004). This includes low pay, no overtime pay, and not having the ability to take earned compensation time. Youth, lack of work experience, and having a child are also related to turnover (Ellett, 1999; Ellett et al., 2003; Barak et al., 2001). In addition, lack of support by peers, supervisors, and the overall organization are related to higher levels of turnover (Barak et al., 2001; Ellett, 1999; Ellett et al., 2003; US GAO, 2003; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2004).

Competency issues have also been found to be related to turnover. Employees who feel they have inadequate training and lack the requisite knowledge and skills are more likely to leave

than those who feel competent (Barak et al., 2001; Ellett et al., 2003; US GAO, 2003). Other variables related to high turnover are case-load size, lack of job satisfaction, risk of violence, and lack of promotional opportunities (Barak et al., 2001; Ellett et al., 2003; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2004).

Predictors of Retention

Commitment to the organizational and professional mission of child welfare is related to higher rates of retention (Ellett et al., 2003; Rycraft, 1994). Child welfare workers indicate that social work competence and the ability to overcome barriers for clients are also related to retention (Ellett et al., 2003, Rycraft 1994). Supervision is a key variable related to higher retention rates, as case-workers who feel supported by their supervisors are more likely to stay (Ellett et al., 2003; US GAO, 2003; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2004). Lewandowski (1998) examined employees who received a Title IV-E stipend and found a larger retention rate among BSWs (43.1%) than MSWs (26%) and also found that Title IV-E trainees who were employees prior to the program were more likely to complete their obligation (payback period for receiving the stipend) and to have significantly higher retention rates.

Predictors of Job Satisfaction

Child welfare workers who express job satisfaction have a greater affinity with their agency and in turn are more likely to stay at that agency (Landsman, 2001). Variables related to job satisfaction include a belief the organization carries out its mission and good communication within the organization (Samantrai, 1992; Sharma, McKelvey, Hardy, Epstein, Lomax, & Hruby, 1997). Latitude in decision making and role clarity lead to higher job satisfaction (Sharma et al., 1997), as does the worker's approval with the organization's recognition of employee contributions.

The literature to date studies cross-sections of child welfare workers and uses as the criterion variable the worker's "intentions" to leave. Findings from these studies have to be interpreted

cautiously. The longitudinal study presented here examines similar predictors found in the empirical literature. It advances knowledge in this area because it tracks workers through the system and compares those who actually left to those who stayed.

Methods

The Protective Services Training Institute of Texas, through a contract with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), conducted an evaluation study to examine training effectiveness, following all new CPS employees in Texas from November 2001, forward. In Texas, the term *CPS caseworker* refers to those workers who more broadly work in all areas of child welfare, risk assessment investigations, foster care, adoption, family preservation, and substitute care. The study tracked the experiences and perceptions of employees and their supervisors during the first year, following the completion of a training program. The current findings are based on more than 1,100 employee surveys at two periods of time: first at graduation from the training program and again after the employee had been in the field for at least three months. During this period, caseworkers left the agency for various reasons. This study compares those employees who left CPS to those who stayed. The study will continue to follow up with the workers at 18 months after their hire date and at three years after their hire date. At those times workers will be asked questions concerning salary, commitment to child welfare, and other indicators of retention from the literature.

Currently, individuals interested in becoming a CPS worker for DFPS go through a hiring process that includes a criminal background check, child abuse and neglect background check, and an interview with three CPS supervisors. Interviews surround the presentation of a CPS case scenario followed by a series of questions directed at the person's ability to solve problems and make decisions.

Once hired, DFPS mandates all employees complete a six-week basic skills development (BSD) training prior to taking any

TABLE 1

Employee and Former Employee Respondent Characteristics

	EMPLOYEES (N=1283)		FORMER EMPLOYEES (N=598)	
	N	%	N	%
Gender*				
Male	184	14	121	20
Female	1096	85	477	80
Ethnicity				
American Indian/Alaskan Native	11	1	5	1
Asian/Pacific Islander	10	1	12	2
Black	347	27	155	26
Hispanic	293	23	116	20
White	600	47	297	50
Other	14	1	9	2
Degree				
BA/BS	842	66	264	61
BSW	258	20	146	24
MA/MS	88	7	39	7
MSW	81	6	37	6
Other	12	1	10	2
Major of Highest Degree				
Social work	339	27	183	32
Psychology/counseling	272	22	134	23
Sociology/criminal justice	331	27	136	24
Business	72	6	19	3
Medical-related	18	2	2	0
Political science	26	2	10	2
Education	32	3	20	4
Humanities	90	7	40	7
Other	58	5	29	5

* $p < .05$

primary case responsibility. At graduation from BSD, all employees fill out a survey related to satisfaction with training and job placement. Two post-graduation surveys go to the CPS workers and their supervisors: one approximately six months from the time of employment and one at 18 months. These surveys seek to measure perceptions of job competency and job satisfaction and related predictors. Not reported here for lack of sample size to date is the second post-BSD graduation survey. DFPS notifies the researcher when an employee leaves CPS, which is noted in the data file, allowing the comparison of employees to former employees at each survey point. Findings related to predictors of why CPS employees leave and stay are presented. For a more detailed description of all the findings, see Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick (2004).

Comparison of CPS Employees and Former Employees

This section compares the responses of BSD graduates currently employed with CPS with those no longer employed with CPS. For those no longer employed, no distinction is made between those whose employment was terminated and those who resigned, as that information was not available to the researcher. Graduates no longer employed with CPS are referred to as *former employees*. This section first presents a comparison of the BSD graduation survey, followed by a comparison of the first follow-up survey.

Comparison of Graduation Survey Responses for Employees and Former Employees

The term employees includes those respondents currently employed with CPS as an employee or an intern (N=1,283). At the time of this report, 598 people who completed BSD were no longer employed with CPS. Table 1 presents a demographic comparison of current employees and former employees.

The majority of current and former employees are female (85% and 80%, respectively) and white (47%, 50%). The majority of

TABLE 2

Respondent Characteristic: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees
(Continuous Variables)

	EMPLOYEES (N=1283)			FORMER EMPLOYEES (N=598)		
	MEAN	RANGE	MEDIAN	MEAN	RANGE	MEDIAN
BSD Exam Score	87	53-99	88	87	61-98	88
Number of dependents*	.80	0-7	0	.6	0-6	0
Income	49,031	0-750,000	35,000	45,694	0-200,000	35,000
Years child welfare experience	1.5	0-26	0	1.4	0-25	0
Years social work experience	2.2	0-30	0	2.2	0-30	.30

* $p < .05$

employees have either social work degrees or sociology/criminal justice degrees, and the majority of former employees have social work degrees. Chi-square analysis found a significant difference between employees and former employees in regard to gender ($\chi^2=10.287$, $p < .01$). Women are more likely to stay employed with CPS; 305 males completed BSD, but at the one-year survey, 40% (121) were no longer employed. In contrast, 30% (477 of 1,573) of females were no longer employed.

At the completion of BSD, employees are required to take an exit exam, which assesses the employee's competency in the major content areas of their training. Employees and former employees had similar exam scores with both showing means of 87 (Table 2). Employees had slightly higher average household incomes than former employees. Employees and former employees had a similar number of years of social work and child welfare experience. Independent sample t-tests were performed to determine statistical significance between employees and former employees, and one variable was found to be statistically significant. Independent sample t-tests revealed employees had more dependents than former employees ($t=-3.6$, $p < .01$).

TABLE 3

Experience in Pre-BSD: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees

	EMPLOYEES (N=1283)			FORMER EMPLOYEES (N=598)		
	MEAN	RANGE	MEDIAN	MEAN	RANGE	MEDIAN
Days in unit before BSD	16	0-180	12	16	0-88	12
Hours with supervisor before BSD	10	0-480	3	9	0-264	3
Hours with peer trainer/mentor pre-BSD	36	0-500	15	36	0-528	15

* $p < .05$

TABLE 4

Perceptions of Pre-BSD: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees (Reported in Percentages)

	EMPLOYEES (N=1123)				FORMER EMPLOYEES (N=546)			
	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA
<i>Learning Facilitation</i>								
By supervisor*	5	11	45	39	7	15	45	33
By peer mentor	6	6	36	53	3	8	35	54
By unit workers	2	5	41	51	1	8	41	50
<i>Enthusiasm</i>								
Supervisor helped me be enthusiastic*	5	8	35	52	6	13	39	42
Peer/mentor helped me be enthusiastic	5	9	39	47	3	11	43	43
Unit workers helped me be enthusiastic*	3	12	43	42	3	18	42	37
CWLA Field Guides' usefulness	3	15	55	26	4	16	53	27
Time in unit pre-BSD	3	7	31	59	4	9	35	52

* $p < .05$

Overall, employees and former employees had similar experiences in pre-BSD, including number of days in the unit before BSD and hours with peer trainers/mentors (Table 3). Employees spent slightly more average hours ($M=10$) with their supervisors before BSD than former employees ($M=9$).

The experiences in BSD were similar for employees and former employees, but employees rated their perception of BSD more often as "strongly agree" and also more positively than former employees (Table 4). Independent sample t-tests revealed several of the responses reached statistical significance. Employees rated their supervisor as facilitating their learning (agree and strongly agree) with 84% of the participants, while 78% of former employees did so ($t=-3.17$, $p<.01$). Employees felt significantly more positive about the role their supervisor ($t=-2.83$, $p<.01$) and unit worker ($t=-2.83$, $p<.01$) had in facilitating their enthusiasm for their job. Most employees (85%) said their unit workers encouraged their enthusiasm (agree and strongly agree); 79% of former employees found the unit workers as such. Time in pre-BSD was also rated significantly higher by employees than former employees ($t=-2.24$, $p<.05$).

TABLE 5

BSD Classroom: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees
(Reported in Percentages)

	EMPLOYEES				FORMER EMPLOYEES			
	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
Facilities conducive to learning	1	5	52	42	1	7	52	40
Trainers were prepared	1	4	46	49	1	5	43	52
Trainers were responsive	1	2	38	59	1	2	38	59
Materials were adequate	1	5	49	44	1	4	49	46
Gained knowledge and skills	0	3	46	51	0	4	47	49
Activities in BSD enhanced learning	0	5	46	48	0	6	48	46

* $p<.05$

TABLE 6

Experience in OJT: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees

	EMPLOYEES (N=1140)			FORMER EMPLOYEES (N=541)		
	MEAN	RANGE	MEDIAN	MEAN	RANGE	MEDIAN
Days in OJT	9	0-120	5	8	0-80	5
Hours with supervisor OJT	8	0-200	2	8	0-340	2
Hours with peer/ mentor OJT	21	0-420	10	22	0-280	12

Employees and former employees did not differ significantly on their perceptions of the BSD classroom during BSD Training (Table 5). Both employees (97% agreed or strongly agreed) and former employees (97% agreed or strongly agreed) found the trainer responsive. In both groups, more than 92% consistently agreed or strongly agreed that the facilities were conducive to learning, the materials were adequate, the trainers were prepared, and knowledge and skills were gained, and BSD enhanced learning.

Employees and former employees spent similar numbers of days in on-the-job training (OJT), with employees spending an average of one day more in OJT than former employees (Table 6). Employees and former employees spent the same amount of time with their supervisors in OJT, while former employees spent slightly more time with their peer trainers/mentors in OJT than employees.

Compared to employees, former employees reported overall less positive perceptions of OJT. Three items reached statistical significance (Table 7). Independent sample t-tests revealed significant differences between employees and former employees with regard to the supervisor's facilitation of learning in OJT ($t=-2.92$, $p<.01$); supervisor's role in increasing enthusiasm in OJT ($t=-3.52$, $p<.001$); and unit worker's role in increasing enthusiasm in OJT ($t=-2.14$, $p<.05$). Employees rated their supervisors higher in terms of

TABLE 7

Perceptions of OJT: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees
(Reported in Percentages)

	EMPLOYEES (N=1140)				FORMER EMPLOYEES (N=514)			
	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
Learning Facilitated								
Supervisor facilitated learning OJT*	5	12	45	39	7	16	43	34
Peer/mentor facilitated learning OJT	5	6	40	49	2	8	39	52
Unit workers facilitated learning OJT	2	6	45	48	1	7	44	48
Enthusiasm								
Supervisor helped my enthusiasm OJT*	4	10	38	48	6	12	41	40
Peer/mentor helped my enthusiasm OJT	4	8	40	48	3	11	42	44
Unit workers helped my enthusiasm OJT*	3	10	44	43	2	15	45	38

* *p* < .05

TABLE 8

Job Expectations: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees
(Reported in Percentages)

	EMPLOYEES (N=1140)				FORMER EMPLOYEES (N=514)			
	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
The job I am going into is desirable	1	5	46	48	2	6	49	44
Geographical location is desirable*	2	6	41	51	3	10	42	45
Job position was first choice	4	12	35	49	5	14	35	46

* *p* < .05

facilitating learning (84% agreed or strongly agreed) and increasing enthusiasm (86% agreed or strongly agreed) than former employees. Seventy-seven percent of former employees rated their supervisor as increasing their learning and 81% as increasing their enthusiasm. Eighty-seven percent of employees rated their unit workers as increasing their enthusiasm, compared to 83% of former employees. In addition to the discrepancy between the aggregate of agree and strongly agree, in general, fewer former employees responded "strongly agree" to items than did current employees.

Differences emerged between employees and former employees with respect to job expectations at the time of the BSD survey (Table 8). Former employees consistently rated the items at the time of the BSD survey less favorably than current employees did. Only 81% of former employees were placed in their first job choice, compared to 84% of employees. Independent sample t-tests revealed the desirability of the geographical location as significant between former and current employees ($t=-3.27, p<.001$). Employees rated the geographical location of their job higher than former employees. Ninety-two percent of employees rated the location favorable (agree and strongly agree) compared to 87% of former employees.

TABLE 9

Respondent Characteristics: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees at Three-Month Survey

POSITION	EMPLOYEES		FORMER EMPLOYEES	
	N	%	N	%
Investigation	251	46	92	52
CVS	139	26	45	25
FAD	13	2	5	3
FBSS	52	10	16	9
Generic	36	7	8	7
Other	53	10	12	5

TABLE 10

Worker and Unit Characteristics

	EMPLOYEES (N=1140)			FORMER EMPLOYEES (N=541)		
	MEAN	RANGE	MEDIAN	MEAN	RANGE	MEDIAN
No. community resources known by worker	10	0-75	8	9	0-50	7
Resources used for families	6	0-50	5	5	0-50	5
Average no. hours spent w/supervisor per month*	9	0-120	5	7	0-40	5
Average no. hours with peer/mentor per month*	9	0-100	4	6	0-96	3

* $p < .05$

Comparison of Employees and Former Employees: Three-Month Follow-Up Worker Survey

Surveys were sent via e-mail to all BSD graduates after they were with CPS for three months. At the first follow-up post-BSD, 544 employees and 178 former employees completed the first follow-up survey. Employees and former employees are compared in tables 9-12 with regard to their responses on the first follow-up survey.

As shown in Table 9, most employees and former employees were in investigative positions at the first follow-up survey. Overall, employees knew more community resources and used more resources for families (Table 10). Independent sample t-tests revealed significant differences between employees and former employees with regard to the number of hours spent with their supervisors and peer trainers/mentors at the first follow-up survey. Employees spent significantly more hours with their supervisors ($t=-3.2$, $p < .001$) and peer trainers/mentors ($t=-2.3$, $p < .05$) than former employees.

TABLE 11
 Worker's Perception of Self: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees at Three-Month Survey

	EMPLOYEES (N=555)				FORMER EMPLOYEES (N=181)			
	SD	A	SA	A	SD	A	SA	A
I am capable of assessing sexual abuse cases.	2	16	64	18	2	16	64	18
I am capable of assessing physical abuse cases.	0	2	57	41	0	0	66	34
I am capable of assessing neglect cases.	0	1	58	41	0	2	65	34
I am capable of assessing substance abuse cases.*	0	7	59	34	0	12	62	27
I am capable of assessing domestic violence cases.	0	7	60	34	0	7	67	26
I am capable of saving/submitted case documents in IMPACT.*	1	2	39	58	1	2	52	46
I am capable of using IMPACT to meet job responsibilities.	1	5	44	50	1	9	52	38
I understand risk assessment and the difference from case disposition.	0	6	54	40	1	11	55	34
I am capable of doing an ongoing family assessment.	1	14	50	34	4	18	48	30
I am able to create service plans that meet my needs.	1	16	55	29	3	17	53	27
I have the skills and knowledge to testify in court.	3	15	58	24	1	20	59	20
I understand the foster care system.	2	25	55	19	2	26	56	17
I know how to process a removal.	6	27	52	15	4	31	53	12
I know how to process placement.	3	22	52	24	2	23	54	21
I received supervisor support during transition.	2	6	35	57	2	7	44	47
I received peer mentor/trainer support during transition.*	5	11	33	51	6	19	37	37
I received unit workers' support during transition.	2	5	35	59	1	3	47	48

* p < .05

Employees rated the majority of items in Table 11 more favorably than former employees, although only three variables reached statistical significance. Employees were significantly more likely to agree or strongly agree that they were capable of assessing substance abuse cases than former employees ($t=-2.16, p<.05$). Employees were more likely to highly rate their capability of saving and submitting documentation in IMPACT, the computer-based data entry system for all CPS cases, compared to former employees ($t=-2.36, p<.05$). Employees also rated the support they received from their peer trainers/mentors during the transition significantly higher than former employees ($t=-3.13, p<.01$).

One item in which former employees reported more favorable responses pertains to assessing physical abuse. One hundred percent of former employees agreed or strongly agreed they were capable of assessing physical abuse compared to 98% of employees. Both employees and former employees felt equally good about assessing sexual abuse, with 82% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the item.

Although all employees were to have a reduced caseload dur-

TABLE 12

Worker Responsibilities: Comparison of Employees and Former Employees at Three-Month Survey

	EMPLOYEES		FORMER EMPLOYEES	
<i>I have testified in court.</i>				
No	239	43	78	43
Yes	315	57	103	57
<i>I was assigned an appropriate number of cases.</i>				
No	68	12	25	14
Yes	484	88	154	86
<i>I had a reduced caseload.</i>				
No	135	25	48	26
Yes	415	75	133	74

ing the transition time to full caseload, slightly more employees had a reduced caseload than former employees (75% compared to 74%). Similarly, more employees (88%) reported their caseloads were appropriate compared to former employees (86%) (Table 12). The same percentage of employees and former employees testified in court. None of the variables reached statistical significance.

Implications for Workforce Management and Retention

The retention of specialized CPS workers is a complicated issue, and various factors may influence turnover, retention, and job satisfaction. Some of the key variables repeatedly identified in this and other studies include the positive influence of prior experience or on-the-job training, a sense of commitment to and meaning found in the field of child welfare, and the need for strong supervisors who are able to address the emotional nature of the work. The most common negative factors influencing turnover and retention were high caseloads, low pay, worker safety, and lack of proper training.

Based on the current study and the empirical literature review, three key dimensions for retention are explored further below: training, transition to practice, and the role of the supervisor-coworker relationship. Each variable represents the reason staff leave CPS and, in turn, the reason staff stay, continuing their commitment to the mission of child safety, permanence, and well-being.

Training

Entry into any organization is enhanced when new employees perceive the environment to be professional and adequate in meeting their needs. As evidenced in this study, all employees had a positive experience in the BSD classroom. Trainers were found to be responsive, well prepared, and knowledgeable. Employees indicated they gained knowledge and skills while in BSD and were prepared for the job.

Two content areas distinguished employees and former employees: technology and substance abuse. Employees who did not feel capable of navigating the IMPACT system were more likely to leave CPS. As every state now has a database system through which workers must submit reports and keep case files, it is important that training focuses on the use of technology and assesses workers' abilities coming into the agency. Former employees felt less adequate in assessing substance abuse. The majority of families with whom CPS works have substance abuse issues. Although the complexities of child maltreatment and the CPS system often take priority in training and supervision, more training time needs to be spent focusing on technology and on substance abuse, as retention depends in part on caseworkers feeling competent in their positions.

Transition to Practice

In the current study, the training model included a three-month transition to practice framework. The intention of this strategy was to allow the worker to get a gradual caseload and not arrive the first day to the unit with a full caseload. The majority of employees (75%) reported having a reduced caseload. Former employees were slightly less likely to indicate their caseload was appropriate. It may be that even though the former employees had reduced caseloads, their perception was the caseload still overwhelmed them.

Most states experience high turnover rates and may find the idea of reduced caseloads hard to manage, but it has been found to be an effective strategy in retaining workers long-term. Spending sufficient resources in the front end of the process is critical.

Job assignment and location are also aspects of transition to practice. Although job assignment was not found to be a significant indicator of retention, geographical location of the job was significant. Workers who left the agency were more likely to feel the geographical location of the position was not desirable. For example, the Dallas/Fort Worth area is very large, and it includes

two urban cities, many suburban areas, and several rural areas. A person may be placed in Fort Worth but live in Dallas, which can lead to an hour-long commute. The agency strives to place employees where they request but this is not always feasible. When possible, states should consider the employee's request for job location as a means of retaining the worker.

The Role of the Supervisor and Coworker

As indicated in the review of the empirical literature and supported in this study, the role of the supervisor is critical to employee retention. Employees were more likely than former employees to indicate their supervisors facilitated learning and increased their enthusiasm. Workers indicated this in both the on-the-job training and the transition to practice phase of their employment. Employees also spent more time with their supervisor than did former employees.

Coworkers also played an important role in retaining new employees. Workers who stayed with the agency were more likely to indicate they received support from their coworkers and that coworkers increased their enthusiasm for the job.

To assure supervisors and coworkers understand their important role in the development and retention of workers, ongoing professional development is crucial in having an effective child welfare workforce. States must invest in competency-based training based on the CPS worker or supervisor's stage of development. Several states have achieved this through a certification process. Scannapieco and Connell (2001, 2000) outlined a certification process in Texas based on this model. Training ranges from preservice training, to beginning caseworker phase, to advanced caseworker stage. Supervisors are placed on a certification track as well. On both caseworker and supervisor levels, promotions are gained through practice ability, time in position, and meeting professional development requirements. This guarantees workers or supervisors continue their professional development and have access to appropriate and needed training.

Conclusion

Any solution to the problem of retention and worker turnover has to be integrated and comprehensive. As supported by this study and the literature, supervisors and coworkers play a paramount role in retention, as do the emerging training issues surrounding technology and substance abuse assessment. By focusing more resources against these content areas, states may improve retention. Not all of the factors affecting retention are as easily realized as others, but efforts must be directed at all to achieve a stable workforce.

Competency-based professional development is critical to meeting the mission of child welfare agencies and to assuring safety, permanence, and well-being for families and children. Grounding promotion opportunities in the successful completion of a competency-based training program will assure that the child welfare workforce is continually trained and briefed on the best practices and current policies.

Although salary was not explored in this part of the study, it is one of the strongest predictors of why an employee leaves and may be one of the most difficult retention strategies to impact. Agency management, along with other key stakeholders in the community, needs to advocate for increased salaries across the board for all child welfare employees. As outlined in a GAO (2003) report, comparable professionals' salaries far exceed the salaries child welfare workers receive. As a society, we must invest in securing a professional workforce if we are to prevent and reduce child maltreatment, assure child safety and well-being, and improve permanency outcomes for children.

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